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ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER AT THE NEW YORK, N. Y., POST OFFICE.

May 9, 1894.

No. 811.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy,
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LXIII.

THE MAN IN RED OR THE ISLAND ROVERS



THE LIEUTENANT GRASPED THE HAND OF THE BRAVE NEGRO AND THE TWO
STOOD UPON THE BOWS OF THE DOOMED WRECK.

A STORY OF

THE TRIBUNAL'S TEST-OATH.

BY LIEUT. HARRY DENIES PERRY,
United States Navy.

CHAPTER I.

FACE TO FACE WITH DEATH.

"THERE is no hope for us, Paul."

"No, master, none that I can see, sir."

"These islands are uninhabited and we will be
driven upon one of them to our doom."

"Yes, sir, for night is coming on, and we cannot
live in the breakers yonder," and the speaker
pointed to a mass of white spray which broke
upon an island reef half a mile away.

The fate of the two, for there were but two,
seemed inevitable. They were in an open boat,
which had been dismasted and was a mere
wreck upon an angry sea.

One was a young man of twenty-five, with a
sunburnt, handsome face and a form that added
the perfection of grace to symmetry and
strength.

He was clad in a naval uniform and the rank

insignia he wore was that of a junior lieutenant in the American navy three-score and ten years ago.

His companion was a herculean negro, black as ebony, but with a face of marked intelligence and determination.

He was dressed in sailor garb, which, like his master's uniform, was the worse for wear and hard usage.

Their faces were haggard, as from great suffering, and yet they were perfectly calm in the face of the seemingly certain doom which seemed to await them.

Their boat had been a small sloop, but both mast and bowsprit were broken short off, and the cabin was stove in, the hull being half-filled with water.

The sea was running wild, having been severely lashed under a storm of several days, and, drifting among the islands of the Caribbean, the position of the two men was, to all appearances, one from which death alone could release them.

The islands about them were supposed to hold no inhabitant, and with rugged reefs and inhospitable shores, with no sail, mast or oar to guide them, and not a morsel of food and water, the young lieutenant and his negro comrade were forced to look death squarely in the face, and, without the flinching of a muscle they did so.

"We've got to go, master," remarked Paul.

"Yes, there is not a ray of hope for us, Paul."

"And to think, sir, just as you have started home to marry Missy Valerie, and have a fortune and the grand old home all for yourself."

"Yes, Paul, it is hard; but we will meet our fate as men should."

"Yes, sir, for we are men, master, though mine is a black face and I am your slave."

"No, no, Paul, for I freed you a year ago."

"I did not care for my freedom, sir, when you were my master—but see, sir, see!" and the negro's voice rung out loudly, as he pointed over the storm-swept waters toward the island upon which the wild seas were driving them.

The night was close at hand, and yet, in the west, the clouds had broken away, and a ray of sunshine gleamed through, forming a background of clear heavens, against which the outline of the island was clearly limned.

It was a wild, rugged mass of rocks, rising half a hundred feet above the sea level, with here and there rocky points appearing like old castles and steeples breaking the outline, and numerous clumps of pine trees scattered about.

The island was long, irregular and surrounded by a reef that seemed to guard it securely from the bold intrusion of adventurous man.

But what had attracted the attention of the negro, was that upon the top of one of the castle-like rocks, boldly relieved against the streak of rosy sky in the west, was a human form.

It was a woman, for her skirts were seen fluttering in the wind, and she held to her eye a glass which was directed upon the little boat.

"It is a woman!" cried the young officer.

"Yes, sir."

"Then the island has inhabitants, Paul."

"They won't do us any good now, master," and the negro spoke sadly, for the ray of hope, brought up by the sight of a human being on the island, seemed to have almost unnerved him when he realized that their case was hopeless.

"She has disappeared, Paul."

"Yes, master."

"Perhaps to get help for us, as she certainly cannot be there alone, and her glass was turned upon us."

"No one would dare face this sea, master, to help us."

"I fear you are right, Paul," and both seemed cast down by the atom of hope which had been held out for an instant toward them and then drawn back from their grasp.

"Oh, master!"

"Well, Paul?" and the lieutenant was fairly startled by the cry of the negro.

"She is coming, sir!"

"You are right, Paul, and alone!"

Their eyes were now bent upon the storm-lashed waters near the island, where a surf-skiff was visible coming out from under the shore and holding but a single occupant.

That occupant was a woman, for the ray of sunshine from the western horizon revealed her form and flowing hair distinctly.

The little skiff seemed fairly to spring into the air as the surf dashed about it; but it was driven straight onward by the force of the oars held in the hands of its daring occupant, and its course was directly for the reef a few hundred yards distant from the island.

Within that rocky belt the waters were comparatively smooth, excepting right at the shore, where there was a mad surf through which the skiff passed in safety out to the barrier.

Upon that barrier, the reef, the sea drove with terrific fury, and rebounded with sullen roar.

Upon the reef the wrecked craft was driving with great speed, and when it should strike there seemed no hope for those two who were to be flung upon it.

The one in the surf-skiff appeared to have taken in the situation at a glance.

The wreck must drive upon the reef at a cer-

tain point, and there strike and quickly go to pieces, for there was no chance of its being driven over into the smoother water beyond.

When she struck, the occupants must be dashed into the breakers to struggle for life, and, if bold swimmers, they might keep up for awhile, but their strength could hardly stand the test of a fight with the breakers on shore.

So toward the spot where the wreck must strike the skiff was headed, and boldly into the seething waters it was driven, then turned most skillfully, and with her face toward the scene that might be a rescue, perhaps a tragedy, she awaited the coming of the wreck.

CHAPTER II.

A BEAUTIFUL RESCUER.

WHILE the moment is passing between the striking of the wreck and what must follow, I will describe the one who has boldly gone to the rescue.

The glow of sunset falls upon her, while all else is darkening under the storm-clouds and near approach of night.

The island is a weird and desolate background to a picture that is appalling, for the life and death of human beings are divided but by a thread's space.

The skiff is painted white, and though frail-looking, is as buoyant as a cork and mind every touch of the oars.

Between the skiff and the wreck is the ragged reef, upon which the sea dashes with thunderous roar, but the rower's eyes are upon the two men whom she is trying to save, and she is directly opposite where they must be dashed into the seething waters.

And such eyes! Large, glorious eyes they are, full of slumbering passion and intense feeling, and they seem to look into one's very soul.

The face is bronzed in hue, but tinted with the rosy hue of perfect health. The features are cast in a perfect mold that renders her very beautiful.

Her hair is as black as night, and, unloosened by the fierce wind from its fetters, floats out far behind her, in spite of its being heavy with the flying scud.

The form is one that denotes agility and strength, strangely allied to feminine symmetry and grace, and the costume she wears, of a close-fitting bodice, short skirt and bare arms shows off its beauty of outline.

Her arms, rounded and beautiful, are encircled by gold bands above the elbows, and bracelets about the wrists, which are heavily studded with precious stones, while a belt of the same kind is about her slender waist.

Her costume is of the finest silk and lace, and necklaces of pearls, diamonds and rubies are about her exquisitely molded neck, though upon her shapely brown hands she does not wear a ring.

Scarcely over eighteen, she is a maiden of almost barbaric beauty, that one might acknowledge as a queen, and love with all one's soul.

And yet, with all her beauty, her fortune in precious gems, she has risked her life to save two persons whom she can only feel the interest of humanity in.

With a face that shows no fear, she awaits the dread ordeal, confronting the scene, her hands upon her oars, keeping the surf-skiff in place.

Nearer and nearer drives the wreck; darker and darker becomes the scene, and then a voice rings out like a clarion.

She speaks in Spanish and says:

"Ho the wreck! When you strike swim for my skiff!"

"Ay, ay! and Heaven bless you, señorita!" came back in the manly voice of the young officer, for he had heard her words distinctly.

"Now, Paul! keep close to me and strive to reach the skiff of that daring woman!"

The lieutenant grasped the hand of the brave negro and the two stood upon the bows of the doomed wreck.

There was an instant of suspense, and then, borne upon a mighty wave, the hull was hurled with fearful force upon the very top of the rugged reef.

The shock was fearful, and the crashing timbers proved that the stout frame must go to pieces almost at once.

The wild waters swept the deck, and bore upon their bosom the white man and the negro.

For a moment they struggled in the mad vortex; then there was an instant when the negro seemed about to succumb; but the hand of his master grasped him, and they were swept onward out of the raging breakers into smoother waters, where, upon the very verge of the boiling, writhing surf, was the skiff, and the men were able to grasp it.

"Hold hard, while I draw you out of this danger!" cried the girl, and her oars did good work.

"Now, one aid the other to get in the skiff."

"Ay, ay, señorita!"

"Come, Paul," was the cheery reply of the young officer, and the negro, who had been half-stunned by the breakers, was aided into the little craft.

Then he lent a helping hand and drew his

master into the skiff, and at once the maiden pulled toward the shore.

"Will you not allow me to take the oars, señorita?" asked the officer, gazing with admiration into the dark, handsome face of the young girl, for there was light enough yet to reveal her beauty.

"No, señor, for the shore surf is dangerous, and I know the course to take," was the reply.

The officer bowed and was silent; but he could not take his gaze off the beautiful girl, and when they reached the surf on the island shore, he still regarded her, seeming to have forgotten the danger they were all in.

But she sent the skiff in safety through the surf, and ran it into a small lagoon where she soon had it moored against the bank.

"You are safe now, señor," she said, with a smile, and she too regarded the face of the young sailor with the same rapt attention which he had bestowed upon her.

"And we owe our lives to you, señorita. Heaven bless you! will ever be my fervent prayer."

He held out his hand as he spoke, and she was about to grasp it, when, suddenly, a tall form stepped between them, and a stern voice uttered the words:

"Hold! the Queen of the Island Rovers can touch no stranger's hand!"

CHAPTER III.

THE ISLAND ROVERS.

THE one who had so rudely stepped between the young officer and his beautiful rescuer, had appeared almost like an apparition from a thicket of dwarf pines growing upon the banks of the lagoon.

He had seen the daring rescue of the two wrecked men, and, as they had approached in the surf-skiff, had stepped back within the shadow of the pines, as though not caring to be seen when they should land.

As he did so he muttered some words in a strange tongue, and his face seemed to writhe with hidden emotion.

The lagoon was hardly wider than forty feet, and ran back into the island, piercing through the rocky cliff, and its banks were fringed with undergrowth.

In the lagoon, moored to the banks, were a number of surf-skiffs, similar to the one in which the maiden had gone to the rescue of the two men, only of larger build; and further in, around a curve, were half a dozen small vessels of a class seen in West Indian waters, and noted for their great speed and seaworthy qualities.

The spot where they had landed was just at the bend of the lagoon, and this much the young officer and the negro saw at a glance, when the tall man appeared so abruptly and rudely upon the scene.

The stranger was a man to attract attention anywhere.

This much the two observed at a glance, even in the gathering gloom, and they also noted that his manner was threatening.

He was over six feet in height, with great, broad shoulders, slender waist and powerful limbs, and yet his movements were graceful and almost catlike in quickness.

He wore a blue velvet jacket, richly ornamented with gold lace, a pair of white duck trousers, stuck in top-boots, and about his waist was a scarlet sash in which was stuck a jeweled, long-bladed knife and a pair of pistols.

A sombrero, encircled by a gold band, set in precious stones was upon his head, and his shirt-front, cuffs and collar were of the finest lace.

The man's face was as dark as an Indian's, his eyes and hair and beard intensely black, and he had a strong claim to good looks, though the glitter of his white teeth, which he showed like a snarling dog, gave him an unpleasant expression, and one that looked dangerous.

When he stepped between the maiden and those whom she had rescued, his eyes flashed fiercely, and his touch upon the hand of the young sailor was almost vicious.

Water-soaked, wretched, suffering as he was, the officer was nettled by the act and manner of the man, and said, hotly:

"My touch dishonors no woman's hand, señor, and I bow before her with only deepest gratitude and respect."

"Señorita, will you grasp the hand of one who owes you life and all?"

"Yes, señor, for I can see no harm in so doing; so stand back, Mazula, for thy Queen commands it!" and, as she grasped the hand of the sailor, she turned quickly toward the man whose grip had fallen upon his knife.

He gave her a revengeful glance, but dropped his hand from his knife-hilt, and answered:

"I respect the command of Zulita, our Queen; but what is her will regarding these two intruders into the retreat of our people?"

"They came not of their own will, for their vessel, a wreck, was driven ashore. Let them remain until they can depart in peace, if they will take the oath of secrecy which I must demand of them," replied the young girl.

"They are not of our people, and their oath will not be held sacred after they are gone; so they must either become members of our band, or—"

"What, Mazula?" demanded the girl.
 "Die!" was the savage response.
 "They will take the oath and keep it!"
 "Come, follow me, for you need food and rest," and the girl led the way along the winding bank of the lagoon.

As they walked along, the officer following the maiden and the negro close after him, the angry islander brought up the rear.

The officer saw that the vessel lying moored in the lagoon had shorter lower masts than were the topmasts—the evident intention being to house the latter so that they could not be seen over the island-top by vessels passing near.

He also saw that there were fully half a score of these vessels, and that half of them were armed with a serviceable battery.

But not a man was to be seen upon one of the craft, though all on board was in ship-shape and perfect trim.

Following the windings of the lagoon for several hundred yards, after passing through the ridge of land which encircled the island near the sea-shore, they came out into a basin in which were a number of cabins, among them several of quite pretentious appearance.

Lights glimmered here and there, and groups of people were seen on all sides—men, women and children—all dressed in pretty much the same style as were the maiden and the man who was with the officer and negro, only they were less richly attired.

As the four walked briskly along, the young girl directing her steps toward a large cabin under an overhanging cliff, the people looked up with amazement and quickly crowded about them.

Many angry glances were cast at the strangers, and hands dropped upon knife-hilts, as though longing to use the blades; but she who had been addressed as Queen held on her way and no one seemed to dare to interfere with her.

Arriving at the cabin, she halted and spoke to a man who came toward her.

"Luka, this señor and his servant were wrecked on our island, so care for them well."

"Yes, my Queen; but they are to be held as prisoners, of course?"

"They could not escape did they wish to; but you are to keep your eye upon them that they come not to harm. Do you understand, Luka?"

"Yes, my Queen," answered the man, and he turned toward the young sailor and the negro who had so unexpectedly found succor in the home of the Island Rovers, a strange people of whom much was told yet little known.

CHAPTER IV.

A JEALOUS LOVER.

FROM the cabin where she had left the two wrecked men, and which was known among the islanders as the Fort, the young girl wended her way up a gentle slope to where stood a spacious dwelling in the midst of orange-trees and with flowers growing about it in great profusion.

The structure was built of the wreckage of vessels, and was most skillfully put together in the shape of a hull, while the rig above was that of an American schooner, with sails neatly furled and all being in perfect condition.

The hull rested in a bed of green grass, the sod being in hillocks, to represent the waves of the sea, and an anchor cable was down, as though the craft was at anchor.

Ports in the side served as doors and windows, and over the deck above was an awning, where the occupants could sit out under the shade and enjoy the cool breezes.

There were several guns on the deck, and the vessel was in fact thoroughly armed, as though against attack from a land force, for its battery commanded the entire valley and the entrance to it from the lagoon.

One large room in the center of the hull appeared to be an audience-chamber. Two rooms upon either side were the living apartments of the fair young Queen.

All were furnished with an air of luxury, and a profusion also that would indicate that the furnishings had been obtained without cost of gold.

Entering one of the open door-ports, the Queen was met by a girl with a pretty face and graceful form who announced that supper awaited.

"I care for no supper, Lazuli," was the reply; at which the maid seemed surprised, for the beautiful Queen was usually blessed with a very good appetite.

To and fro the room she paced. A ship's lantern swung overhead, lighting up the chamber, and revealing her face at every turn in her walk.

The lovely countenance wore a look strange to it, as though called there by thoughts of a worrying nature.

"I do not understand it," she murmured several times, and she passed her hand across her forehead, as though to clear her brain.

Suddenly, as she approached the doorway in her walk, she started, for a form stood before her.

"Mazula!"

"Yes, Queen Zulita, it is Mazula," was the reply of the man who was the one who had met

her upon the beach when she had rescued the wrecked seamen.

"Why are you here, Mazula?"

"I would know, my Queen, why you protect these two men, who have invaded our island retreat?" and the man spoke nervously.

"Mazula, they did not invade our island, for I brought them hither."

"To-morrow I will see them, and decide what is best."

"The people wonder that you put off until to-morrow what can be done to-night."

"The people have no right to wonder regarding the actions of their Queen, and I believe that you alone are guilty of doubting my actions," and she spoke with anger in voice and look.

"No, Zulita, I do not doubt you, for one who rules our people can do no wrong."

"But, Queen, within the month you are to be my bride, and it is natural that I look now to see that our people are not imposed upon."

"For generations our people have roved the seas, from island to island, and you know that we are rich, richer than the kings of nations are."

"This treasure is a sacred trust of our rulers, and though you are Queen, I come of your race also, and have been selected as the one to become your husband and thus King of the Island Rovers."

"Hence, my beautiful Zulita, I feel an interest in advance of the actions of my Queen, and fearing that your kind heart will permit you to spare these men, who may come back to rob and slay us, I have come to you to ask you to let me have them put to death this night."

The man spoke earnestly, the maiden listening in silence and without emotion, except when he spoke of putting the officer and the negro to death, when she started and her eyes burned threateningly.

"Mazula," she said, when he had ceased speaking.

"It is true that you won my girlish heart, and I was glad when our people selected you as the one to become my husband."

"But, until I am your wife, you are not king here, and I rule the Island Rovers, and not one word of complaint has come to me from my people since the death of my father, their rightful king, one year ago."

"I will to-morrow decide what is to be done with that officer and his servant, and what is right I will do; but I will use my own judgment in the matter."

"Good-night, Mazula."

The man bowed in silence and left the room, and Zulita once more began to pace the room, her brow wearing a cloud, as though her thoughts were not the pleasantest.

In the mean time Mazula seemed to have made up his mind to some course, for he walked briskly toward the Fort, and reaching there was met at the door by Luka, the officer in charge.

The man saluted Mazula with marked politeness, knowing that he was to be the king of the Island Rovers when he made Zulita his bride.

"What says our Queen, señor?" asked Luka, as Mazula halted near him.

"The Queen says that she will decide to-morrow as to the fate of the two men; but she knows not that our law says that no man shall live a night in our retreat without taking the oath to become as one of us; hence I shall, as commandante, Luka, take the responsibility of putting them to death at once."

The eyes of Luka seemed to flash with a strange light and he turned his head away, as though to prevent Mazula from reading what was in his thoughts, while he said:

"As commandante, señor, you have the power to command, and I will have to obey your orders."

"Then put those two men in double irons, lead them to the cliff overhanging the sea, and hurl them into it," was the savage command.

Luka responded promptly:

"Your orders shall be obeyed, Señor Commandante. I will at once call the executioner."

"Do so," was the peremptory order.

Then came the low-muttered words:

"She would never harm him, for I saw by her look that she loved him the moment she met his eyes; and, therefore, he must surely die to-night."

CHAPTER V.

THE EXECUTIONER.

"WELL, Paul, this is not so bad as we feared," said the young lieutenant, when he had been shown to a room in the Fort, and he turned to the negro, who had just been handed a tray of supper brought them by a servant at Luka's order.

The room was not an unpleasant one, and contained a table, several chairs and a couple of hammocks swung to serve as beds.

"No, master, this is better than we thought, sir, for I expected we would be dead long before this," answered Paul, as he set the tray down upon the table and spread before his master the fruit, sweet bread and coffee which it contained.

"Well, I fear we will be a bone of contention among these people; but the Queen, as they call that beautiful maiden, is our friend, Paul."

"Yes, sir; and she is beautiful; but, my! how mad that handsome señor looked when he saw the Queen watching you so sweet."

"So sweet, Paul?"

"Yes, master, she just kept her eyes on you all the time, same as it was a case of love at first sight."

The young officer blushed and replied:

"It is certainly so upon my part, Paul; but we owe our lives to the noble girl."

"Indeed we do, sir; but who is she, master?"

"You have heard the sailors talk about a strange people, who wander about from island to island, and live by piracy, it is said, though they never can be caught at it?"

"Yes, sir; and some say there is a thousand of them, and they sail about in their little vessels, but keep to themselves all the time and go into no port."

"Yes; they are called Island Rovers, Paul."

"And are these those people, sir?"

"I think so, for no other have a queen, and I never knew these islands to be inhabited."

"They do say, master, that they are mighty cruel folks to them they capture or who fall into their hands."

"I have heard all manner of stories about them, Paul, even that they are, like the Flying Dutchman, suffering under a curse, brought upon them by their ancestors, and that they are never allowed to enter any seaport or land upon the coast of any country; but I cannot believe that beautiful Queen, as they call her, can be cruel, and I hold hope that no harm shall befall us."

"Yes, master, and I'm going to pray a little that we may get off all right to-morrow; but I don't like the looks of the señor, handsome as he is, and I am sure he means mischief."

"Well, don't worry until the time comes, Paul; but let us go to sleep, for we have had a hard time of late," and having eaten his supper the officer threw himself into one of the hammocks and was soon fast asleep.

Paul followed his example, after he had uttered a few words of prayer for their safety, and he was just sinking into a deep slumber, when into the room stalked three persons, one of them bearing a large lantern.

The officer and the negro sprang to their feet in an instant, and beheld Mazula and Luka, with a third person clad from head to foot in red, and looking very much like Mephisto, whose style he had seemed to copy in his odd attire.

"Señor, a word with you please," said Mazula, sternly, addressing the officer.

"Well, señor?" was the calm response, though both the lieutenant and his servant seemed to feel that there was trouble ahead for them.

"Who are you, señor?"

"A lieutenant in the United States Navy, señor."

"Your name?"

"Dunbar Kennon, señor."

"And that man?"

"Is my servant and comrade, señor."

"Why are you here on this island?"

"Ask the heavens, señor, for they wrecked our little vessel."

"Whither were you bound?"

"We sailed from a point on the coast, where our vessel lay at anchor, undergoing repairs. We were caught in a storm and blown out to sea, dismasted, and then driven upon this island, where, but for the courage of the beautiful señorita, whom you call your Queen, we would have been dashed to death."

"Do you know where you are?"

"Only that we are upon an island in the Caribbean Sea."

"Do you know whom we are?"

"I suspect that you are a people whom sailors call the Island Rovers."

"We are, and we would ask if you care to join our band?"

"No, señor, for we are Americans, and have a home and a country," was the response.

Mazula smiled; but it was a grim, significant smile, one that neither the officer nor Paul liked. Turning to Luka, he then said:

"You have heard this señor refuse to become one of us?"

"Yes, señor."

"Then let the executioner do his work!"

"I obey your orders, Señor Commandante," and Luka turned to the Mephisto-looking man in scarlet, and who had stood motionless as a statue, and said:

"These men are to die, Mortel!"

"Yes, señor; but how?"

"In irons, over the cliff."

"Yes, señor," and the man in scarlet stepped to a closet and threw open the door.

Within hung what might be called a harness of chains, for there were iron bands for the neck, wrists and ankles, with chain loops banding from one to the other.

Taking one of these harnesses, he approached the lieutenant and placed it upon him, for Dunbar Kennon did not move.

He seemed to realize that he was utterly powerless in the hands of those about him, and was determined to accept his fate, be it what it might, though there was a hope in his heart that the command of Luka would not be carried out.

and they only meant to put them to some severe test to prove their courage.

The iron collar was quickly snapped about his neck, the handcuffs and anklets were also adjusted, and the officer found himself firmly secured and enveloped in half a hundred pounds of iron chains.

Up to Paul the man in scarlet then stepped, bearing the chain harness. The negro sank back as though to resist, but Dunbar Kennon said quickly:

"Do not resist, Paul, for we are in their power and can do nothing."

The negro bowed and the chains were clasped upon him.

"They are ready, señor," and the man in scarlet turned to Luka, who looked toward Mazula.

The latter said:

"Then march them over the cliff into the sea."

The executioner stepped before the two men and said:

"Follow me!"

They obeyed and Mazula and Luka followed behind.

Leaving the Fort they went toward a high cliff, at the base of which the sea thundered with appalling roar, seeming to shake the very foundations.

To the brink they went, and then the man in scarlet asked:

"Will you walk boldly into the sea, señor, or shall I hurl you over into the depths from this cliff?"

"We will walk over, for we do not fear to die, if die we must: so, hands off!" was the bold response.

"You are a brave man, Señor Americano," exclaimed Mazula, with real admiration at the pluck of the young officer and the negro, who, seemingly, would do just as his master did, for he was silent and kept his eyes fixed upon him.

"I need not be told that by you, señor," was the retort of Dunbar Kennon; then he asked:

"Are we executed thus by the orders of your Queen?"

"You are executed by my orders, Señor Americano."

"I thought so, for I could not believe that beautiful Queen would risk her life to save two men simply for the pleasure of having them hurled from a cliff a couple of hours after."

"Our Queen, señor, rescued you from death; but as you have refused to take the oath of allegiance as an Island Rover, I, as commandante of the forces of our people, order you to your death."

"And should we take oath now, we would have our lives spared?"

"No, for it is too late now."

"You have the power to so decide?"

"Yes; for, having refused, you cannot now change your mind to save your life."

"I demand that your Queen know that we are to die."

"A doomed man, Señor Americano, can make no demands," was the half-scornful response.

"Then there is no hope for us?"

"None."

"Paul," and Dunbar Kennon turned sadly to his faithful companion.

"Yes, master."

"You speak Spanish, so have heard what has been said?"

"Yes, master."

"There is no hope for us?"

"None, sir."

"We will die as brave men, walking side by side over the cliff."

"Yes, master; but, oh! is it not awful?" and the negro shuddered.

"It is a sad ending to our lives, Paul, and, better had it been had we gone down in the storm. But, there is but one death, and after a moment of anguish all is over."

"Are you ready, my brave friend, Paul?"

"Yes, master."

"Then come, let us end the suspense at once."

The negro stepped quickly to the side of his sailor master, their manacled hands clasped together, and they stepped forward for the fatal walk over the cliff into the sea, the man in scarlet close behind them.

CHAPTER VI.

THE QUEEN OBJECTS.

WITH folded arms and sinister face, Mazula stood gazing upon the two men whom he had mercilessly condemned to a death most terrible.

At one side stood Luka, the lantern revealing upon his face also a strange expression, the reason for which will soon be made known.

Toward the abruptly ending cliff marched slowly, for they were weighted down with their chains, Dunbar Kennon and his brave negro servant, and close upon their heels, as though driving them on to take the fatal leap, came the masked man in scarlet.

The lantern on a rock near by cast a weird light upon the scene, while the angry sea, breaking upon the base of the cliff, sent showers of spray up into the air.

Upright and with unflinching mien the young naval officer and the negro marched to their

doom, enveloped in their iron harness of chains, which would drag them quickly down to death.

Three more steps and the brink would be reached, and their lives would be snuffed out forever.

But those three fatal steps were not taken by the doomed men, for suddenly before them, like an apparition, glided Zulita, the Queen of the Island Rovers, her hands uplifted, her eyes blazing in the lantern's glare, as she cried in Spanish:

"Hold! this shall not be!"

A Spanish oath sprung to the lips of Mazula, and something very like an imprecation came from Luka.

Morte, the man in scarlet, uttered no sound, but stood with bowed head before his Queen.

"Speak, Mazula! What means this midnight murder?" cried the full, rich voice of Zulita, and it quivered with emotion as she uttered the words.

"It means, my Queen, that, as commandante, I questioned these men, and they refusing to take the Oath of Death, that made them members of the Island Rovers, I ordered Luka to send them to their doom," Mazula answered, haughtily.

"Did you not hear me tell you I would decide as to their fate on the morrow?"

"I did, my Queen."

"And you disobeyed me?"

"Our laws, my Queen, demand that no stranger shall pass a night in our midst without taking the Death Oath, or suffering the fate of refusal."

The young Queen started at this, but said, with a sneer:

"You seem well instructed. Mazula, in the laws of our people."

"As one who is to be their king, it is right that I should be, and I felt that you were unaware of this law when you sought to show mercy to these men, so I ordered their execution."

"This law alone saves you, Mazula, from a visitation of my anger, if such is the law. You know, Morte, if such law there be, so speak!"

"My Queen, the Island Rovers have been so governed for generations—since your grandfather made them a people," answered the man in scarlet.

"And you, Luka, say the same?"

"Yes, Queen, though I believe our ruler has the power to decide whether to accept or reject the law," and there was a wicked gleam in the face of Luka as he glanced at Mazula.

"I thank you, Luka, and you, Mazula, should know, as you are so well versed in our laws, if such be the case."

"It is; but no ruler has ever dared avail himself of it to spare a foe to our people," was the decisive reply.

"Then I dare, for I have such power, as Luka says. Have I not, Morte?"

"You have, my Queen."

A moment was the young girl silent, and then she said, in her peremptory way:

"Morte?"

"Yes, my Queen."

"Lead that señor and his slave back to their room and take off those irons!"

"Yes, my Queen."

"Luka!"

"Yes, my Queen."

"I place these two men in your charge. Obey no orders that come not from my lips."

"Yes, my Queen."

"If harm befall them, Luka, I shall give you into the hands of the man in scarlet."

Luka shuddered, but bowed low, and seemed anxious to get from under the eyes of the angry young Queen, who then turned to Mazula and said:

"Señor, for some reason buried in your heart, you sought to have these men put to death. Until I become your bride, I am Queen of the Island Rovers, so beware how you attempt to thwart my wishes."

With this the beautiful girl strode away in the darkness, but not until Dunbar Kennon had again felt the full power of her superb eyes, which had seemed to look into his very soul.

As he placed the two prisoners, for they were nothing more, in their room, and dismissed the man in scarlet, Luka muttered to himself:

"My Señor Mazula failed, and thereby so did I, for had he put these men to death, I feel assured it would have doomed him with our Queen, and with him out of the way, I would have been the next choice of the Island Rovers for their king, by my marriage with that beautiful girl whom I so madly love."

"It may be that the end of all this is not yet," and with this hope in his heart, Luka sought his hammock for the night, fully assured that Mazula would not again attempt to put the shipwrecked men out of the way—at least that night.

CHAPTER VII.

CLOUDLANDS.

THE scene changes from the island in the Caribbean Sea, to a home upon the majestic Hudson River in the State of New York.

Facing the river, and situated upon a hill from whence a superb view of mountain, valley and the Hudson for miles can be seen, there still

stands an old mansion which the finger of time has not destroyed though its foundation was laid nearly a century ago.

The broad acres that surround the mansion were then numbered by the thousand, for I write of a time early in the present century, and one man was lord and master over all, while now a hundred villas may be counted within a mile's circuit of the ancient home.

A wide avenue of Lombardy poplars then led down to the river, where there was a cove in which large vessels could safely anchor, and a highway ran along the bank to a town several miles away.

The mansion was a large one, built as strong as a fort, and with numerous wings and turrets that gave it the appearance at a distance of being a castle.

The grounds about it were not well kept, for there were lawns that were overgrown with weeds, grass grew in the driveways and walks, and rare flowers had been choked out by a rank undergrowth.

The old mansion needed repairing and paint without, though within one wing was most comfortable, while the rest of the house was seldom opened and had been left to darkness and dust.

In the stable was but a wagon, a chaise and two or three old horses, while in a small cottage near by dwelt the two old servants who took care of the household for the master.

But the rest of the estate was well cared for, and its cultivation on shares by neighboring farmers brought in a handsome income for the owner.

And the owner of Cloudlands, as the estate was called, was a man across the threshold of half a century of years, a man whose bearing was haughty, manner austere, and upon whose face a smile seldom came.

He had been a sailor in younger years, and had disappeared from home, to return long after with a wife, to inherit the estate left him by his parents.

In those days Cloudlands had been the pride of the neighborhood, and the people believed that when the heir returned with a young wife, it would again become a hospitable and cheerful place; but the heir was cold and stern to all, and those who knew him best seemed to fear him.

He had had a twin-brother, a bright-faced young fellow, whom all had loved; but one night of storm upon the Hudson, in returning from the other shore, the two youths were capsized in their boat and but one reached the bank.

The body of the missing one was never found, and it was thought that it was on account of his grief at the loss of his brother that caused the survivor to leave home one night and go to sea, and the same shadow seemed to have held over his life ever since.

The bride whom he brought home was a beautiful young creature, and yet the brightness of her life seemed soon to fade out after her coming to Cloudlands, and one night she died, leaving an infant son to be cared for by the stern father.

That infant son was Dunbar Kennon, and, under the care of a nurse and then a tutor, he grew up into a handsome youth, when his father got him a berth in the navy, and he was only too glad to go to sea and escape from under the stern eye of his parent, for between the two there had been no bond of sympathy.

Twice only in ten years had Dunbar Kennon visited Cloudlands. The first time he was only too glad to get back to his ship, for his father seemed even more austere than ever, and the two old servants told him that he seldom left the mansion except to walk down the avenue to the river and back again.

The second time that Dunbar Kennon visited Cloudlands was after his twenty-third year, having been at sea for six years, and it was on this occasion he found a great change, not only in his father, but in all about the old home-stand.

How that change came about he did not know; but it had come, and, strange to say, it was founded upon a tragedy.

Upon one of his walks one afternoon down the avenue to the river, old Captain Kennon halted beneath a tree and regarded the approach of a storm that was sweeping up the river.

As he paused there, with his face toward the eastern sky, with its rosy hue, his features stood out in bold relief, showing a man of daring and resolution, with great intelligence, and yet, all marred by the look of forbidding austerity that rested upon his countenance.

To a reader of human nature Captain Kennon would have been set down as a man with a history, a man, who in his career as a sailor, perhaps, had passed through scenes which had left their deep impress upon him.

His form was tall and commanding, and his face a handsome one, but for its sternness, and certainly he appeared like a man to win hearts and bring happiness to a home circle, did he so wish.

As he was posed there, watching the coming storm he failed to observe a boat skimming close along the shore, its occupant rowing at a quick

stroke, as though to seek shelter before the rain should fall.

Suddenly the oarsman's eyes fell upon the form of Captain Kennon, as he stood there beneath the tree, and instantly he stopped rowing and regarded him with a fixed, earnest gaze.

"It is he! I cannot be mistaken, though many long years have passed since last we met. It is Richard Kennon, the man whom I came here to seek.

"All that I am he made me, and what I have suffered through him I will now have sweet revenge for.

"Rich as Croesus they say he is, and he must pay me well does he wish to silence my tongue.

"Now to face the ordeal which I have, looked forward to for so many long years—now to face Richard Kennon and see him turn livid with dread at sight of me!"

As though wishing not to attract attention to himself, the rower ran his boat inshore, and, springing out, advanced with almost catlike tread toward the owner of Cloudlands.

The man possessed a tall form, well developed, and he appeared in perfect health; but his clothes were ragged, and he had the appearance of being a vagabond.

Approaching the tree, he let his hand fall heavily upon the shoulder of the one he had just uttered threats against, and sternly uttered were the words:

"Bid me welcome, Richard Kennon!"

A shout arose from the lips of Richard Kennon, and his face did indeed turn livid as he beheld the man at his side, for he seemed to recognize him at a glance.

Then, a man of nerve he grasped the other by the throat, and through his shut teeth hissed the words:

"Death shall welcome you, and my curse be upon you dead!"

There was a short struggle, fierce and deadly, the gleam of a knife, a cry of despair and a man fell dead in his tracks, a blade having pierced his heart.

Then the body was raised and thrown into the river, which bore it away, the boat was pushed off adrift, and the man who had the life of a fellow-being upon his hands turned and walked toward Cloudlands, just as the storm broke in fury upon land and river, and loud peals of thunder, vivid darts of lightning rolled and flashed about his head, as though to vent Heaven's anger at his red deed.

CHAPTER VIII.

METAMORPHOSED.

THE two old servants, who saw their master approaching the house, unmindful of the pouring rain, hastened to meet him and set forth dry clothing for him.

But they fairly shrunk back from his angry gaze and pale face, and dismissing them for the night he began to pace to and fro along the large hallway.

The lamps had been lighted, and after awhile he roamed from room to room in a nervous sort of way, to at last retire to bed, when he knew that the dawn was approaching.

Through the night the storm had raged with violence, and when the two servants entered the mansion, to waken their master and serve breakfast, as was their wont, for they dwelt in a cottage in the yard, they found him complaining of being ill.

But he refused to see the doctor and for several days lay ill, his mind seeming to wander in delirium while the faithful servants devoted themselves to him day and night, and answered all the silly questions his fevered brain prompted him to ask.

At last he grew better and began to appear almost cheerful, so much so that old Toby and his wife Nance, said that his sickness had done him good.

After a week or two, to the great surprise of the old servants, he announced his intention of having Cloudlands overhauled from cellar to garret, the grounds improved, flower-gardens laid out, and the mansion furnished throughout.

He sent for his attorney, whom he had not seen for ten years, and told him just what he wanted, and soon after the mansion was filled with carpenters, painters and finishers, while he took into his own hands the planting of the estate, hiring men for that purpose.

Servants were hired, a butler, coachman and others, and within a month's time Cloudlands looked like another place altogether.

What had caused this wonderful change in Richard Kennon no one knew, until it was whispered that he had been appointed the guardian of a young girl, who was a cousin of his, and who had been left an heiress by the death of her father, a wealthy merchant of some South American country.

This ward was to become an inmate of Cloudlands and reign as mistress there, with the anticipation, the gossips said, of Richard Kennon either making her his wife, or wedding her to his sailor son.

At last the ward arrived, and that she was beautiful even maidens who had hoped some day to win Lieutenant Dunbar Kennon were forced to admit.

Her beauty was the more striking from a certain haughty mien and queenly grace, and the young men of the neighborhood made up their minds to try and win her, for outside of her personal charms she possessed the virtue of being an heiress to great wealth, it was said.

The stern look upon Richard Kennon's face seemed to have been softened by the coming of Valerie Rossmore, the sea-captain's ward and relative, and he appeared no longer like his former self.

He had a pleasure craft built, in which sails were enjoyed upon the river, and in which the master was wont now and then to go down to New York in, when business or pleasure called him there.

He bought half a dozen fine horses for the stable, and was often the escort of Valerie for a morning gallop or an afternoon drive.

Then he threw open the doors of Cloudlands to the neighboring gentry, something which had not been done since his parents' time, and gave to his lovely ward a magnificent welcome party.

The neighbors were astounded, but delighted, and congratulated themselves that at last the master of so superb a home as Cloudlands had at last awakened from his Rip Van Winkle sleep.

One afternoon as Captain Kennon and Valerie were seated upon the broad piazza, enjoying the balmy breeze and the picturesque scenery spread out before them, Toby, who had been promoted to butler brought out the mail, which had just arrived from the village.

"A letter from Dunbar, my child, and I hope that it is in answer to mine telling him of my having metamorphosed Cloudlands into a lovely home, over which I had brought you to preside as mistress," and so saying Captain Kennon broke the seal.

The letter was dated at a port in the West Indies, and told the captain that his son was coming home almost at once, his brig having captured a couple of pirate schooners, after a desperate action in which she had been so severely handled that she would come to the States for repairs.

The letter ended with:

"I have your letter, dear father, written six weeks ago, and am glad that you have brought your ward and our cousin to Cloudlands, for she will greatly cheer you by her presence. I am sure.

"I do not exactly recall the relationship, or just whose child she is; but I never was adverse to claiming kinship with pretty cousins, and I feel that she is all that is beautiful from what you say.

"Why, your whole nature seems changed, so bright is your letter to me, and cheerful, in comparison with the three-line moody epistles I have received once a year, on Christmas.

"My negro servant, Paul, will accompany me to Cloudlands, for he seems never to wish to leave me, although I gave him his freedom papers several months ago; but he says that he is still my slave, poor grateful fellow that he is.

"But expect me, dear father, within a few weeks after you receive this letter, and give my love to sweet Cousin Valerie."

Captain Kennon read the letter aloud to Valerie, and then she said:

"I know that I shall like him, Uncle Richard; but who is this slave that he speaks of?"

"A negro whom he bought in New Orleans some years ago when he was a midshipman.

"The black was to be sold to a villainous-looking man, whom Dunbar heard tell him, for he was witnessing the sale at the mart, that he had a grudge against him from some cause, and the negro turned his eyes appealingly to my son, who at once bid for him, and, willing to pay high when he had made up his mind to save the slave, he got him.

"Such was Dunbar's report of the affair in his letter, and though he told the negro he could buy his freedom from him by small payments, he never did so, and about a year ago Paul saved Dunbar's life."

"I do not wonder that there is a bond of friendship between the two," said Valerie, and after a silence of some minutes she remarked:

"I am most anxious to see my handsome and gallant cousin, for I have already fallen in love with the portrait of him which hangs in the library."

"And what will Farmer Frank Fairfield say?" asked Captain Kennon with a smile.

"If Cousin Dunbar is like his portrait, I shall love him; for that is the one face in the world for me; but if not, then Farmer Fairfield may win, for he is a most ardent suitor; but see, sir, is not that schooner going to land at Cloudlands?"

"It is, and there springs ashore an officer in uniform and a negro.

"It is Dunbar, and Paul, and he has quickly followed his letters.

"Let us go and welcome him, Valerie."

CHAPTER IX.

THE SAILOR'S RETURN.

WHEN Captain Kennon saw that the schooner had landed at Cloudlands pier to put off passengers, and recognized the fact that Dunbar Kennon had quickly followed his letter home, he arose, and with Valerie, went down the beauti-

ful avenue to welcome his nephew, at the same time calling to Toby to send some of the men after the luggage.

As the old gentleman and the maiden approached the young naval officer and the negro, Paul, who were walking toward the mansion, Valerie's eyes were earnestly bent upon the face of the cousin whom she had never seen.

"Will he prove like that portrait, which fascinates me?" she asked herself over and over again.

As they drew nearer her face flushed, for she saw the tall, splendid form, the graceful, easy carriage, and at last the strangely handsome, fascinating face.

It was the real face of the portrait, only, as her eyes told her, far grander than what had been placed on the canvas.

And Dunbar Kennon had his eyes fixed upon the maiden walking by his father's side.

He saw that her form was elegant, her every motion graceful, and then that the face was lovely in the extreme.

Their eyes met, and he doffed his hat; but he stepped forward and grasped his father's hand first, and said in a hearty way:

"Bless you, dear father, and it does my heart good to see you again, and your face tells me that you are happy.

"But who could help being, with so fair a kinswoman and ward, for this is Cousin Valerie, I know, as none other could be so beautiful."

She turned crimson at his words, but gave his hand a warm grasp, while she said:

"Welcome home, Cousin Dunbar."

"Yes, Dunbar, my son, I also bid you welcome," and the voice of the old sailor quivered and he seemed deeply moved by the coming of his son.

"And give Paul welcome, too, father, for you remember him from his last visit to Cloudlands, and but for him I would not now be here, as he saved my life one night, when some pirate prisoners mutinied and would have killed me."

"Yes, Dunbar, you wrote me of it, and Paul is welcome, too, for he has a big heart and noble nature.

"Valerie, I told you of Paul?"

"Yes, uncle, and I am glad to greet him," and the haughty maiden held forth her hand, and it was grasped by Paul, who bent low, while he said:

"I'm afraid, Missy Valerie, master won't wish to go to sea again, with you at Cloudlands."

"Well said, Paul, and gallantly said, too. I see that you lose nothing by being my son's valet," Captain Kennon remarked, with a laugh.

"And I'm glad to see you looking so well, sir," said Paul, and he turned back with the servants to get the luggage, while the captain and Valerie, one on either side of the returned sailor, walked toward the mansion with him.

Dunbar explained his following his letter so closely by stating that it had missed the former packet and left on the one that had only sailed a day before his brig.

He also stated that he would have at three months' leave of absence from his vessel, and then be ordered to Southern seas to protect the American vessels from the pirates that swarmed in those waters.

It was a pleasant evening there in Cloudlands, and old Toby spread a supper out before the young sailor that would have tempted a monk to break his fast.

Then Valerie sung for the lieutenant, accompanying herself skillfully upon the harp, and her rich, melodious voice sunk deep into his heart.

She also sung several Spanish songs, for, to his surprise, he found that she spoke the language well, and when at last she arose to say good-night, he was forced to confess to himself that she would prove a very dangerous cousin, as he was half in love with her already.

And Valerie?

"My beau ideal in everything," she had said, to herself, as she swept from the room.

"I shall win him, for without his love my life would be desolate indeed.

"I have encouraged Frank Fairfield; but I knew I could not love him as I was capable of loving.

"He must go, and I will win Dunbar Kennon.

"But, Heaven have mercy! suppose he already loves?"

"Ah! I dare not think of it, and I will not." And so she went to her room, and father and son were left alone together.

A decanter of rare old sherry was between them, and Richard Kennon sipped his wine in silence, leaving his son to do the talking.

And all about Valerie Rossmore Dunbar Kennon asked, and her coming to Cloudlands, until his father mused:

"My plot will work well, for she loves him, and has since she saw his portrait, and he cannot help loving her."

But though the father and son sat up until after midnight together, and the former spoke of the affairs of Cloudlands, and how prosperous all was with him, he never once told of that tragedy down on the banks of the Hudson, that

afternoon when the strange boatman came, and what had followed his coming.

In fact, not a breath of the fatal meeting had gone abroad through the land, and the secret of his death-struggle Richard Kennon had kept locked securely in his bosom.

It was strange that with such a secret his whole manner had changed, that austerity had given place to cheerfulness, that his life as a recluse had been changed wholly; but so it was, and with no witnesses of the deed the slayer had thrown the body of the slain into the river, and locked up the dread deed forever in his heart, he hoped.

CHAPTER X. RIVALS.

WEEKS passed away, and the days spent at Cloudlands seemed to be full of happiness for those who dwelt there.

Such a change had come over the stern man, Richard Kennon, that his son could hardly realize that he was his father.

In bygone years he had always held aloof from every one, and though Dunbar had passed his leave at home he had seldom met his father save at the stately dinners which the master insisted his son should join him each day.

The boy, youth and young man, as time had passed, had really never known his father, and now, after a long absence to return and find him a different man was a great joy to Dunbar Kennon.

"It is all the work of Cousin Valerie," he said to himself.

Then Cloudlands had been grand, gloomy and desolate.

Now it was all sunshine, and Dunbar Kennon was happy that it was so.

Captain Kennon kept much in his library, reading or devoting himself to the cares of his vast estate; but he was ever cheerful when he met his son and ward at meal-times, or sat with them on the piazza.

Thus they were left a great deal to themselves, and they seemed to make the most of it.

They rode horseback together, drove together, or spent the time out upon the river, either rowing in a light skiff or sailing in the pretty Cloudlands yacht.

In bad weather they sung together, for Dunbar Kennon had a lovely baritone voice and sung many a pretty Spanish and French ballad, while he also played the guitar most skillfully.

He sketched well, too, and many a pretty bit of scenery about Cloudlands was transferred to paper by his artistic pencil.

This was dangerous work for two such people as were Dunbar Kennon and Valerie Rossmore, and it could end in but two ways, marriage, or a broken heart for one of them.

The neighbors had called upon Dunbar Kennon soon after his return, glad to welcome him home again, especially as he not only had always been popular, but also because the papers had been full of his daring deeds as a naval officer.

He had won fame and became an idol.

But busy tongues began to talk, and censure fell upon Captain Kennon for allowing his son and ward to be so much together, and also that he did not see fit to have some stately old matron in the house as a chaperon for Miss Rossmore.

But there was one person in the neighborhood who was not anxious to see Lieutenant Kennon return to Cloudlands.

That one was Farmer Frank Fairfield.

He was a handsome young man, who had been fortunate in one way, as half a dozen relatives had died, leaving him their fortunes.

In this way he had become master of some thousands of acres of valuable lands on the river shores, and dwelt alone, excepting half a dozen servants, in the old family homestead of Cedar Hall, which was three miles distant from Cloudlands.

Frank Fairfield had been a midshipman in the navy with Dunbar Kennon, but for some reason known only to himself, he had resigned in a foreign port, and, after wandering in Eastern lands for a few years, had returned to settle down at Cedar Hall as master and farmer of his large estate.

It was said that he had been very wild as a midshipman, and some even hinted that he had been forced to resign from the navy; but this appeared to be only idle rumor, as after his return he appeared to be a steady young fellow, and his wealth made him a lion in the community, while parents with marriageable daughters were only too anxious to welcome him in their homes.

For some time the young farmer allowed Cedar Hall to remain as he had inherited it, needing paint, repairs and furnishing, though his fences and outbuildings were kept in perfect condition, and the fences were never allowed to have a break in them, while the lands were cultivated to perfection.

When asked about it, he was wont to say with a laugh, that he was waiting to allow his wife, when he got one, to fit up the old home to suit herself.

At last rumor had it that Farmer Fairfield had fallen in love, and with a young girl who had very little to look forward to in the way of an inheritance.

Her name was Di Douglass, the daughter of a man who was half-farmer, half-sailor, for he was skipper of a Hudson River packet-schooner in the summer, and in the spring and fall planted and harvested his crops.

His house was a pretty cottage on the river-bank, surrounded by half a hundred acres, and his family consisted of his wife, daughter and two sons, respectively two and four years younger than their sister Di, who, at the time of the rumor that she was to marry Farmer Fairchild, was in her nineteenth year.

River Vale, as the home of Skipper Douglass was known, was a pretty house, surrounded with many comforts, and embowered with flowers, which Di had planted and cared for.

Among all the girls in the neighborhood none was more beautiful than Di Douglass, and her parents had sought to give her the best of educations, so that she was an accomplished young lady as well as a perfect housekeeper.

She rode well, could row a boat as well as her father, and often had sailed his schooner in a voyage up and down the river.

One day while sitting upon the little piazza of her home she saw a skiff coming up the river containing two persons.

She saw that a squall was sweeping down upon them, and feared that they would be capsized, so in her anxiety arose and walked down to the shore to meet them.

Hardly had she reached there when, as she had feared, the squall struck the little skiff and threw it bottom up, while the spray and rain at once hid it from her view.

Instantly Di sprang into a life-boat and started to the rescue, pulling with a strength that was remarkable.

Over the now rough waters sped the boat, through the driving rain and spray, and the fair oarsman seeming not to heed the terrific peals of thunder and livid flashes of lightning.

A few moments more and she saw a form clinging desperately to an oar, but almost exhausted by the struggle for life.

Instantly she seized him, and with considerable effort dragged him into the boat, where he sunk unconscious.

Then she looked about for the other occupant of the skiff; but her search proved useless, and reluctantly she turned toward the bank, where her brothers met her.

"It is Farmer Fairchild, sister Di," said Saul Douglass, a fearless-faced lad of seventeen, and he added:

"We tried to come to your aid, but the hired man had my skiff, and nothing else but the boat you had would live in that sea."

"I hope he is not dead, sis."

"No, but he needs all the care we can give him. Help us up to the cottage with him, Dick, and then go after the doctor with all speed," she said, addressing her younger brother.

Farmer Fairfield was taken up to the cottage and placed in the best room, the doctor was sent for and after a long time he revived, and was able to tell how his companion, one of his farm hands and a good swimmer had been drowned, while he who could not swim a stroke had been saved.

He knew that he owed his life to Di Douglass, and from that day the handsome young farmer became a frequent visitor at River Vale, until rumor had it that he was engaged to the skipper's pretty daughter.

Then, upon the scene, like a brilliant meteor, came Valerie Rossmore, and meeting her, Frank Fairfield became her very shadow; Di Douglass seemed to have been wholly forgotten by him, and rumor had it that the rich young farmer was to marry the ward of Richard Kennon, when lo! Dunbar Kennon appeared at Cloudlands and busybodies were at fault, for he seemed to have driven Farmer Fairfield wholly off the mind of Valerie Rossmore.

How it all would end no one could tell; but many old people, and young ones too, shook their heads when they discussed the matter in a way that indicated that they believed that trouble would yet come upon some one who broke their faith, as two of the four interested certainly had done.

CHAPTER XI.

WITH DEADLY INTENT.

BACK to that island in the Caribbean, where dwell the strange people ruled over by Queen Zulita, I must again take my reader, after having made him the better acquainted with the antecedents of Dunbar Kennon.

It will be recalled that the going of Lieutenant Kennon to Cloudlands, when he met there Valerie Rossmore, and found his father a changed man and such a complete metamorphosis over all, was the second visit which he had made, in years, and it was a year prior to the time that he is presented to the reader with Paul on the deck of the little wrecked sloop.

What occurred during his visit at that time to Cloudlands will be eventually made known; but at present we will advert to the happenings following his rescue by Zulita, the beautiful Queen of the Island Rovers.

Worn out by all they had passed through, both Dunbar and Paul slept most soundly until the morning, when they awoke with an appetite

to do full justice to anything which might be set before them.

Their clothes were dry, and while his master was making his toilet as best he could, Paul strolled out to look up Luka, to see what prospects there were for breakfast.

In a short while he returned, and Lieutenant Kennon saw that something had occurred to excite him, for seldom was it that Paul exhibited much emotion.

"Well, Paul, what is it, for you look positively scared?"

"I am scared, sir."

"Are we to be put to death?" quietly asked the officer.

"We are to die, sir, if we eat any breakfast this morning."

"Ha! what do you mean?"

"Well, sir, I went out to try and find Señor Luka, and not finding him about the big cabin I went to the one in the rear. A man was there cooking breakfast, and seeing me he told me to watch some fish that were frying while he ran down to the storehouse for some coffee."

"I did so; but seeing that wicked señor they call Mazula, coming, I stepped back behind a curtain, not wishing him to see me. He entered the room, sir, and seeing no one, took out a bottle and sprinkled a red powder that looked like cayenne pepper over the fish and upon all the food the man had prepared."

"Then he slipped out very quickly with a laugh like a hyena might give, and walked rapidly off toward the cliff, for I watched him through the window."

"In a few moments the man came back with the coffee and said our breakfast was ready, sir, for Señor Luka had told him to cook it."

"Then we don't wish any of that breakfast, Paul, hungry as we are."

"No, sir, we don't, for what I saw took my appetite just clean away," and Paul gave a low chuckle.

"How about the coffee?"

"There is no poison in that, sir."

"Then we'll drink that, and let the food alone. Come."

They left the room, and going out to the cabin in the rear of the fort found that the man had breakfast ready, set upon a small table; but to his surprise they drank only coffee and then walked out toward the cliff.

For some moments they stood there regarding the wild but picturesque scene about them. Kennon took minute observations of all surrounding him, and saw that the island was far more extensive than he had at first supposed, numbering many hundred acres.

It was surrounded by a rugged reef, which was visibly marked by breakers at all points except one, and that was just opposite the cliff upon which they stood.

There, a quarter of a mile off-shore, was a break in the reef, hardly wider than two hundred feet, and through this opening the huge waves rolled, to dash against the base of the cliff.

The reef ran about the same average distance around the island, protecting it from the wild waves and forming a basin of comparatively smooth water within, except at an extremely high tide or severe storm, when the sea would break over the rocky barrier.

The lagoon seemed to be the only entrance to the island, the shores being rough and precipitous at all other points; but in the lagoon was a safe anchorage for small boats.

There were numerous groves of pines about upon the high eminences, and the interior of the island was like a valley, with rich undergrowth, grass, fruit-trees and vegetables growing in abundance.

Around the edge of the valley the Island Rovers had their homes, half a hundred cabins being visible.

Then there was the fort, a large store-house and the more pretentious home of the Queen, built, as has been said, in the shape of a vessel.

Over the home of the young Queen, at the mizzen-top, Dunbar Kennon saw floating a flag with a blue field, in the center of which was an eye of gold above two white wings, a strange device which he could not then understand.

It was evidently the flag of the Island Rovers.

From the sea he noted that no trace could be seen that the island was inhabited, and yet the interior was a peaceful spot, with its rude homes and rude people, and, but for the fact that he believed the Rovers to be pirates, it would have been a pleasant dwelling-place among them, away from the cares of the busy world.

There were several hundred people visible down in the valley, some of them working on their cabins, others tilling the soil, a few working on sails and spars, and numerous women and children scattered here and there, the former knitting or sewing, the latter at play.

"Paul!"

"Yes, master."

"I have discovered their secret. Do you see that opening in the reef?"

"Yes, sir, just opposite to the cliff here?"

"Yes, and it is there that their little vessels run in and out, sail around to the lagoon on the other side, where they have a safe harbor. See those small boats anchored about in the basin,

while their crews are fishing, and meeting with a good catch, too.

"I believe a vessel can sail all around this island within the circle of that reef."

"It looks so, master; but you don't think any poison could have gotten into the coffee, sir?"

"No, why?"

"I guess it's because I'm scared, sir; but it seemed to me I tasted something like *medicine*."

"Your imagination, Paul; but do you know that we did not warn that man not to touch that food?"

"No, sir, we did not."

"I never thought of it, and he may have eaten it."

"Come, let us go at once and see, for I would not have harm befall the poor fellow through my thoughtlessness."

"And mine, too, master; but then, I was afraid to tell on Señor Mazula, for he's a dangerous man, sir, to my thinking."

"Yes, his arts have certainly shown him so; but let us hurry on, and I only hope we are not too late."

In a moment more they arrived at the cabin, and—*they were too late!* The man lay dead across the table, where he had seated himself to eat the food which the prisoners had not touched, and in the doorway stood Mazula, an evil glimmer in his fierce eyes as he turned them upon Dunbar Kennon and the negro.

CHAPTER XII.

AN OBSTACLE IN THE PATH.

LEAVING Lieutenant Dunbar Kennon and his faithful servant, Paul, in their peril among the Island Rovers, their only friend Zulita, the beautiful young Queen, I will ask my readers to again accompany me to Cloudlands on the Hudson and the neighborhood adjacent to that grand old home.

It will be remembered that, after Di Douglass had saved the life of young Farmer Fairfield, the two had been considered as lovers until Valerie Rossmore came between them.

Then all were certain that young Fairfield trifled with and deserted the daughter of a poor skipper, beautiful though she was, to win the hand of Valerie Rossmore, the queenly beauty, and heiress it was said to a vast fortune.

When Dunbar Kennon returned home and became a hero in the eyes of all, comment was soon made that there was one who had not called to welcome him.

"This one was Frank Fairfield, and the more was thought of it as the two were known to have been midshipmen together years before upon the same vessel and were supposed to have been the best of friends."

In truth, there were old people who recalled the fact that word had come from foreign lands that Dunbar Kennon had, one night of storm, sprung into the sea and rescued Frank Fairfield who had been washed overboard by a huge wave and could not swim.

And yet, owing his life to his shipmate, Frank Fairfield had not visited the young officer immediately upon his return to Cloudlands.

What it meant no one could understand, but the fact was true.

Farmer Fairfield had been a daily visitor to Cloudlands before the coming of its heir, and as a certain proof that he was engaged to Valerie Rossmore, he had begun to fit his handsome old home up regardless of cost, as he said he would do when he had a wife secured.

The day of Dunbar's return home he had started to ride over to Cloudlands, and had reached the massive gate turning in from the river highway, when he beheld several servants belonging to the place and a negro engaged in getting some baggage from the pier.

"Who has arrived at Cloudlands, Kit?" he asked one of the men, and just then his eyes met those of Paul, the latter doffing his tarpaulin politely, for he had known Frank Fairfield when he was a midshipman on the same vessel with his master six years before.

"The young master, sir, Lieutenant Dunbar Kennon," answered the man.

From the lips of the young farmer came something very like an imprecation, while his face turned white from some emotion that swept over him.

But without a word he turned his horse and rode homeward, while there broke in savage tones from between his shut teeth:

"His coming home shall not end it, I vow before high Heaven! Fool! fool that I was to dally, when I might have made her my wife!"

"But he shall not prevent it! No! no! sooner that he die than that," and viciously spurring his horse the young farmer rode rapidly on to his home, now all ready to receive the bride which he had hoped to place there as mistress, for the workmen and furnishers had done their work well.

And so it was that the weeks went by, and Frank Fairfield had not called at Cloudlands.

The rumors that his not doing so appeared strange reached his ears, but he offered no reason to those who spoke to him upon the subject, and his looks indicated that it would not be well to press the matter.

Other rumors came to him also, and to the effect that the woman he had hoped to make his

wife had fallen in love with the handsome heir of Cloudlands, as he had with her, and that they were to be married before the lieutenant returned to his ship.

This news caused Frank Fairfield to turn livid with rage, and calling for his horse he mounted and started for Cloudlands.

His road lay near River Vale Farm, and as he was riding along through a pine grove, where often he had walked with Di Douglass, breathing love into her ear, his horse suddenly came to a halt, for a form stood in the pathway before him.

Farmer Fairfield had been riding with head bent and eyes upon the ground, and his set lips and pale face indicated that he was in deep and by no means pleasant meditations.

Looking up as his horse halted, he saw before him Di Douglass, and the expression upon her face did not banish the look upon his own, for he saw there what he would rather not have seen, a glance that showed him that he had brought a woman to bay, and any man who has seen a woman at bay from a just cause, and with right on her side, can understand just how the skipper's daughter appeared to Farmer Fairfield, as she stood there barring his path.

She was an obstacle in the way that caused something very like a shudder to pass over Frank Fairfield, and his eyes drooped beneath her gaze.

CHAPTER XIII.

A WOMAN'S THREAT.

"GOOD-MORNING, Di!" said the handsome young farmer, assuming an air of indifference which he did not feel.

The young woman made no reply, but stood regarding him earnestly.

Certainly she was one to win a man's heart, for her eyes were large, black, shaded by long lashes and full of expression, while her hair was bronze in hue and was coiled about her handsome head in heavy waves.

Her form was slender, but perfect in outline, and there was an air of grace and refinement about her one would hardly have expected to find in one raised in an humble home on the Hudson.

Now, as she confronted the young farmer, there was an expression in her splendid eyes that was dangerous, for they burned with a look that made him feel uneasy.

"If you are not inclined to answer my salutation, Di, I will ride on," he said in a reproachful tone, and he started to urge his horse forward.

Quick as a flash she seized his bridle-rein and cried:

"You shall not pass on, sir, until you answer to me for what I have suffered through you!"

"Why, Di, are you mad?" and the voice of the farmer had a tone that showed he had cause to fear the woman.

"I am on the verge of madness, Frank Fairfield, and do you wonder at it? You owe to me your life, and I owe it to you that I am now at your mercy. You won my love, and, as I believed in your honor, I became, as you led me to believe, *your* wife."

"You asked me to secretly marry you, and, yielding because I loved you, I sailed with you one night to yonder distant village, where you told me you had arranged for a clergyman to marry us."

"A man did act as a minister, a ceremony which I believed to be honest, was gone through with, and I thought myself your wife, though I wondered that you, who appeared to be wholly free to act for yourself, should ask me to wed you in secret."

"But I yielded because I loved you, and loving, trusted you, for I could love no man of dishonor."

"Then a change came, for you met that beautiful, proud woman, Valerie Rossmore. From that day you seemed to forget me, and I bore my sorrows in silence and in secret."

"Then I heard that you were engaged to her, and I wrote to you that you must protect me."

"Your reply was that you were pained to learn that the man whom you had paid to engage a clergyman to marry us had confessed that he kept the money and had gotten a pal to perform the ceremony, and that the marriage was a false one, no record being made of it, and the one who united us having no right to do so."

"Did you not know that this would almost break my heart, Frank Fairfield? And did you offer at once to make reparation by going with me to a clergyman and publicly making me your wife?"

"No, you *avoided* me, hoping that I would remain silent under my sorrow and shame."

"You hoped that I would dare utter no word after my oath to keep secret what had occurred until you gave me the right to speak."

"But, Frank Fairfield, though I will keep that oath, it yet will not prevent me from acting, and I give you fair warning now that if you do not remarry me within ten days from this *I will kill you!*"

Her eyes flashed, but her manner was strangely calm, and the guilty man shrunk from before her gaze.

He was silent and seemed not to be able to utter a word.

After a moment she continued:

"Remember my threat, Frank Fairfield, and remember, too, that I do not ask to live with you at your grand home of Cedar Hall. Oh, no! I know you now as you *are*, and your craven heart shrinks before me! You show just what you are, and I despise you—scorn you—loathe you! But, remarry me you shall, and then you can go your way in peace and I will go mine. Refuse, and so help me Heaven, as I saved you from death, so into the clutches of death will I send you."

"Remember! you have ten days to act in, and you know where to find me to send your answer whether it shall be honor to me or death to you."

"*Coward, go!*"

She stood aside from his path, releasing his bridle-rein as she spoke, and his restive horse bounded away, greatly to his relief, for he seemed utterly powerless to urge him.

She did not even look after him, but strode away through the pines toward her home.

In the mean time the horse went on unchecked by his rider until he came to a gate opening into the highway which led to Cloudlands.

This served to awaken Frank Fairfield from the spell which was upon him and a curse broke from his lips.

Opening the gate he passed through and then went at a slow pace toward Cloudlands.

In spite of the warning which he had received from the lovely girl to whom he owed his life, whom he had so deceived, he was determined to go on to Cloudlands and see Valerie Rossmore.

He had not dared go there, for some reason known to himself, since the return of Dunbar Kennon, and yet he had made up his mind to brave all at last and know if it was true that Valerie Rossmore intended to become the wife of the young sailor.

This thought seemed to have made him reckless, and he was bound to know the worst, and at once.

Had he not met Valerie Rossmore then Di Douglass would have held the first place in his heart; but she had won at once an influence over him which he either could not, or was unwilling to shake off.

Turning into the gateway leading to Cloudlands, he rode up the grand avenue slowly, for he was undecided how to act.

But he had made up his mind to brave all, and he would not flinch then.

He approached the hitching-race, tied his horse and strode toward the mansion.

He was looking his very best, and had taken great pains to appear well in the eyes of Valerie Rossmore.

Ascending the broad steps a servant met him at the door and bowed politely while he asked him to enter the parlor.

He was strangely nervous from some cause, and, as he heard the rustle of a dress upon the stairs, which announced the coming of the woman he loved, he grew more so and his face turned very pale.

There must have been some deeper motive than love at the bottom of his emotion, for there was a look upon his face that indicated viciousness rather than dread of learning that he was to be cast out of the heart which he had believed to be all his own until a few weeks before.

CHAPTER XIV.

A REFUSAL, A CHALLENGE, AND AN ACCEPTANCE.

CONCEALING his emotion, by a great effort, as Valerie Rossmore swept into the room, Farmer Fairfield stepped forward to greet her, while he said in an assumed tone of pleasantry:

"Did you think I had forgotten you, Valerie?"

"Ah, Mr. Fairfield, you have indeed been a stranger, though really I have not missed you, since the return home of my cousin, Lieutenant Kennon."

She gave him her hand as she spoke, though he saw what her words implied, and said, hotly:

"Yes, I have heard that you were devoted to Dunbar Kennon."

"Certainly, as he is to me."

"And how about your promises to me, Miss Rossmore?"

"Say rather your pledges to me, Mr. Fairfield, for you have pledged me your love over and over again, and I, believing that I really cared for you, allowed you to do so; but I have changed my mind."

"You mean that you do not love me?"

"Yes, decidedly."

"When did you come to this conclusion?"

"Since I met Lieutenant Kennon."

"Ha! he has defamed me to you?"

"Oh, no, and I do not think he would defame any one. He is too honorable for that. He never spoke of you to me."

"I cannot believe this."

"You have no reason to doubt my word, sir."

"Why then have you changed so toward me, if it was not on account of what was told you by Dunbar Kennon?"

"Ah! he has something, then, he could tell of you?" she asked, quickly.

"I did not say so; but he doubtless has tried to destroy your regard for me by stories against me."

"Lieutenant Kennon, as I said, sir, has never spoken of you to me."

"I asked him if he did not know you, and he replied that he had years ago known you when you were midshipmen together."

"That is all that he said?"

"Yes, all."

"And yet you have changed toward me?"

"Yes, sir."

"And why?"

"Because I discovered that I was wrong in thinking that I loved you."

"How did you make this discovery?" and he spoke with a sneer.

"By meeting the man whom I knew that I could love with all my heart and soul," was the frank response.

"And that man is my traducer, Dunbar Kennon?"

"I will not submit to your doubting my word, Mr. Fairfield, for I told you that Lieutenant Kennon never uttered one word that was unkind of you."

"But he is the man whom you love?"

"He is."

"And you allowed me to remain in ignorance of this change in your affections?"

"You were a daily visitor here until Lieutenant Kennon arrived, and then you absented yourself without a word, though I knew you had not left home."

"When you came I want to tell you that I was mistaken in my feelings toward you; but, as we were not engaged, I saw no reason why I should send you word to that effect, or tell you unless I was asked by you for an explanation. Now you know the truth, sir."

"And you love this man?"

"If you refer to Lieutenant Kennon, yes, I answer."

"You shall never marry him."

"That remains to be seen."

"I make no idle threats, Valerie Rossmore."

"What is your threat, sir?"

"That you shall never marry Dunbar Kennon," he fairly hissed forth.

"Mr. Fairfield, the man who threatens a woman is a coward," came the quick retort.

He started and his pale face became deadly in hue, as he said:

"Oh, that a man would dare utter those words to my face!"

She walked across the room in her queenly way, threw open a door and called out:

"Cousin Dunbar, come here, please."

There was a quick step heard approaching from the library, and Frank Fairfield seemed to realize that he had gone too far, for he knew that he was to meet Dunbar Kennon face to face.

He had come over in ill-humor, to force from Valerie the truth of the rumors as to her engagement to the young sailor.

He had felt viciously toward Dunbar Kennon, and if Valerie treated him with disdain he would feel assured that it was from things which had been told her by the naval officer, and in such case he felt revengeful, and this accounted for his wicked expression while awaiting to see the maiden.

Now he had uttered words which he knew would bring him face to face with his successful rival.

Valerie Rossmore was not the woman to be bullied, and, with a protector near she had called upon him.

Entering the room Dunbar Kennon saw who the visitor was and bowed coldly, while Valerie said:

"Cousin Dunbar, I told you that Mr. Fairfield had honored me by confessing his love for me, and, but for meeting you I would have become his wife. He now attributes my dismissal of him to your having slandered him, and he made threats, which caused me to say that a man who threatened a woman was a coward, and his reply was that no man would dare to utter those words to him."

Her voice was low, sweet and had in it a tone as though she felt deeply hurt at the situation she was placed in.

Dunbar Kennon listened attentively, his face never changing, and when she had ceased he said in his quiet way:

"Mr. Fairfield, I am not one to slander any man, and of you I have not even spoken the truth, as I might have done; but with Miss Rossmore, I repeat that the man who would threaten a woman is unworthy the name, and certainly proves himself a coward!" and the young sailor's eyes were fixed full upon the face of the man he addressed.

Frank Fairfield started toward the officer at his words, but checked his intention, whatever it might have been, and said hoarsely:

"Dunbar Kennon, I believe that you have undermined me in the love Miss Rossmore felt for me, and I shall demand satisfaction for it, as well as for the insult you have but now flung in my teeth."

"I am wholly at the service of Mr. Fairfield,"

was the calm reply, and with a bow the young farmer turned and left the room.

He had come to Cloudlands to know if Valerie Rossmore had escaped him, and if so, to seek revenge upon her by killing Dunbar Kennon, who he meant should give him satisfaction, not only for losing the maiden, but for an old affair of years ago when the two were middies together, and which he did not doubt that the lieutenant had given his version of.

When he had left the room Valerie Rossmore turned and said:

"Oh, Dunbar! see what trouble I have caused."

"Innocently, my dear, you have been the cause of trouble between Fairfield and myself; but certainly I could not have allowed him to insult you as he did and under my own roof."

"But do you know aught of him that is to his detriment?"

"Of that we will not speak, for it is past, and I have never referred to it, nor will I."

"It is the present that I resent, and I am only glad that my coming prevented you from becoming his wife."

"Now, let us drop the matter, Valerie."

"But he surely will challenge you?"

"Certainly."

"And he is noted as a dead-shot, and is said to practice several hours each day."

"I have the choice of weapons, Valerie."

"But his valet is a Frenchman who was once swordmaster in Napoleon's army, and he keeps him to fence with daily."

"So be it, Valerie; I am neither a harmless target or the French swordmaster," was the significant reply of the sailor, and drawing her toward him he continued:

"Valerie, I told you of my love for you, and you confessed that you loved me in return; but, as long as I was here with you I wished to enter into no engagement to bind you, or give rise to gossip."

"But, after what has occurred just now, I will ask you to promise to be my wife some day."

"I will return to my vessel, resign after a few months' longer service, and return home to make you my wife, if you will make me happy by becoming such one of these days."

"What is your answer, Valerie?"

She raised her beautiful arms and drew his face down to hers, kissing him on the lips.

That was Valerie Rossmore's answer, and a sailor needed no better one.

CHAPTER XV.

UNLOOKED-FOR REVENGE.

TRUE to his word, Frank Fairfield demanded satisfaction from Dunbar Kennon.

He rode home in a very different mood from that in which he had been when he went toward Cloudlands.

He was vicious then in his humor.

His meeting with Di Douglass had upset him, and he meant to revenge himself elsewhere.

"I have hated that man for years, yes, and dreaded him. I have intended that he should never come home to live here, when I hold power, and have practiced with pistols and swords for one purpose—some day to kill Dunbar Kennon."

"Now the chance has come and he shall die by my hand and I will be avenged for all that I have suffered."

"I will then see if I cannot regain a place in the heart of Valerie Rossmore, for she is only infatuated with the man."

"But Di?"

He brought his horse to a halt as he uttered the name.

"I will seek her, after the duel, and arrange some plan to quiet her."

"Why not marry her and—ah! I must not let evil thoughts get the better of me."

"But now to my challenge to Kennon. By whom shall I send it?"

"Ah! I have it! I will send it by my French valet, Pierre Gerard, and if Kennon is insulted the irate Frenchman will resent it promptly and perhaps save me the risk of fighting him, for deadly hand though I am with blade and pistol, Dunbar Kennon is a fearless man and a skilled one in the use of weapons."

"So I will send Pierre Gerard to him."

Upon his return to Cedar Hall the young farmer sent a servant after "Monsieur Gerard."

This personage dwelt in a little cottage away from the mansion, and which was used as an office, bowling-alley, shooting-gallery and a general resort in wet weather.

The Frenchman had been well-born, he said, a noble, but had become reduced in circumstances from having to fly from France for killing a superior officer in a duel.

He was a stern-faced man, with an eye full of temper, but polite, though cynical.

He had accepted the position offered him by Frank Fairfield, who had found him in a New York inn acting as porter.

The "position" he occupied at Cedar Hall was a complicated one, for he was valet, fencing-master, companion and secretary, and proficient in each duty, while he took his meals with the young farmer, who liked the man.

Monsieur Pierre Gerard played a good game

of whist, sung a good song and could tell a story in a way to entertain, and thus Frank Fairfield found him useful, and a pleasant companion as well as a faithful servant.

When Monsieur Gerard entered the library he found the master of Cedar Hall pacing to and fro in a thoughtful manner, and so said to him:

"Ah, monsieur, you look like ze vas trouble."

"I am, Pierre, for I have got to put your teaching to the test and see if I can kill a man at ten paces, or run him through the heart, whichever way he prefers to die."

"It vas grand, monsieur, tres grand, for it vas an affaire d'honneur?" and the Frenchman rubbed his hands with delight.

"Yes."

"He challenge you, monsieur?"

"No, I am to send the challenge, Pierre, and you are to take it."

"You do me great honor, Monsieur Fairfield, and give me much pleasure."

"I am glad to know it, Pierre, so rig yourself up in your best, order my carriage and drive over to Cloudlands and demand of Lieutenant Dunbar Kennon that he give me satisfaction for the insult he has given me."

"Yes, monsieur, with much of pleasure."

"I will go too quick at once," and the Frenchman hastened from the room, delighted at the chance to see what his pupil could do in an affair of honor.

Within an hour he drove up to Cloudlands, dressed in his best and quivering with joy at the thought that he was again in his element—engaged in a duel.

Dunbar Kennon was pacing up and down the broad piazza, smoking, and advanced to meet his visitor.

He had never seen Pierre Gerard, but recognized the driver of the carriage and supposed that he came from Frank Fairfield.

Greeting the Frenchman, who was extremely polite, he listened to him in silence, as he delivered his challenge, and then said, speaking in perfect French:

"Monsieur Gerard, as I understand your position at Cedar Hall, it is that of valet and fencing-master to Mr. Fairfield."

"Does he send you here with a view of insulting me, or because he wishes me to waive the fact that you are what you are, and to treat you as my equal?"

The eyes of the Frenchman fairly blazed at this, but there was that in the calm dignity of the man before him which controlled his impulse to spring upon him, and he replied in his own tongue and with great earnestness:

"Monsieur Kennon, I was born a French gentleman and misfortune made me what I now am; but to-day I come, in the carriage of Mr. Fairfield, as his friend in this affair, but will return at once, as you care not to refer your second to one who was yesterday a valet, and to-morrow may be the same."

"Pardon me, Monsieur Gerard, for I meant not to wound you. The fault lies with the man who forces you to be a valet, when he should acknowledge you as a friend."

"I will ask my father to serve me in this affair, monsieur, and if you will accompany me I will present you."

"Your father knows me, Monsieur Kennon."

"As Fairfield's valet, yes; but I desire to present you as his friend, for to-day at least."

The Frenchman bowed and accompanied the officer into the library.

It was evident that Monsieur Gerard was pleased with the gentleman to whom he bore a challenge.

Entering the library they found Captain Kennon seated there alone, taking an afternoon nap in his easy-chair, as was his wont.

He arose as Dunbar presented the Frenchman by saying:

"Father, there is an affair to be settled between Farmer Fairfield and myself, and he has sent as his friend Monsieur Gerard, whom I beg you to receive in that light, and also I ask you to represent me in the matter, if you will be so kind."

"Certainly I will, my son, and I am glad that you ask me to do so."

"Monsieur Gerard, I greet you, sir."

"Be seated, please, and I will ring for wine and cigars."

Pierre Gerard was delighted beyond expression, for he found those whom he sought on a disagreeable errand more generous to him than the one whom he represented.

Wine was brought, and after a few moments Dunbar Kennon excused himself and left the room, when an arrangement was quickly made for a meeting at sunset that afternoon at a spot not far from River Vale Cottage, and the weapons were to be pistols, and, those failing, swords.

And so Monsieur Gerard left Cloudlands highly elated over the success of his mission, and Frank Fairfield scowled when he told of his treatment, for he had hoped that it would be different.

But he said:

"I wish it had been swords first, for though I am a dead shot he may do me some harm, even though I kill him, while with blades I could run him through."

"Monsieur, his father and second, demanded pistols first, monsieur, so I was forced to yield, for he had the right to choose."

"All right, I will go and fire my weapons a few times, to get my hand in, and we will go early to the scene to get the range."

"Get my dark gray suit out for me, and—"

"Monsieur Fairfield, I was your friend to-day, not your valet."

The young farmer glanced at the Frenchman, but not wishing to anger him said:

"Ah, yes, I forgot Pierre; but you are not too much of a gentleman to look after my weapons, if you will not my clothes?"

"I will see that my weapons was all right, monsieur," and there was an evil glitter in the eyes of the Frenchman, for he had not forgotten that those who might have resented his bringing a challenge had treated him as a gentleman, while the sender wished to make him still feel that he was a valet.

In the meantime Captain Kennon had told his son of the arrangements made.

"I wish that you had said swords first, father, for then I might disarm him, for I care not to kill him."

"I thought that you did wish to kill him, for he is a dangerous rival, Dunbar, so I selected pistols first; but let us get ready to go to the place of meeting," and an hour after the carriage rolled away from Cloudlands with the father and son, and Paul on the box, for Dunbar Kennon had bid him drive instead of the regular coachman.

When the vehicle drove up to the pretty little glade, where the meeting was to be, they found there already Frank Fairfield and his second, who had come over on horseback to fetch the weapons.

The young farmer looked sullen and malignant, and merely glanced at the father and son, who bowed politely to him.

But Pierre Gerard made up in politeness all that his principal lacked, and he and Captain Kennon arranged all the preliminaries.

It was a beautiful evening, and the sun was nearing the western horizon, but could be seen through the opening of the glade, which ran down to the river.

The two men who were to face each other in deadly combat, took their positions, at the call of Captain Kennon, and standing ten paces apart the pistols were placed in their hands.

"You must fire quickly, for he means to kill you."

"Gerard bade me tell you this," whispered Captain Kennon as he handed his son his pistol.

Dunbar Kennon made no reply, but bowed, and stood ready.

"I shall kill him, Pierre," said Frank Fairfield, as he took the weapon from the Frenchman's hand.

The word was given, the pistols flashed, almost together, though Dunbar Kennon fired a trifle the quicker, and both men remained standing, though there was a red cut on the left temple of the young sailor, where the farmer's bullet had clipped the flesh as it tore along.

But there was a look of anger on the face of Frank Fairfield, as he muttered:

"An inch too far to the left—his coolness disconcerted me; curses on my luck!"

But there was a look upon the face of Dunbar Kennon that was one of intense amazement.

"Father, I aimed to wound his pistol-arm, and I never miss. What does it mean?"

"I do not know, my son, other than that this is one time that you did miss; but his aim was almost deadly to you."

"It is but a scratch, sir."

"Does he demand another meeting?"

"Yes, monsieur, my principal demands a meeting with blades," said Pierre Gerard, approaching, for he had overheard the question.

"He shall have it, monsieur," and there was an angry light in the eyes of the sailor.

A handkerchief was bound around his head to stanch the flow of blood from the wound, and then Dunbar Kennon was ready for the second meeting.

And so was Frank Fairfield, while the wicked look upon his face no one could mistake.

The blades crossed, and at once the encounter became a fierce one, for the temper of the young sailor was aroused, and he knew that he fought a man who meant to kill him.

For a few moments only the combat lasted, and then the sword of Dunbar was driven deep into the side of his adversary, who fell back into the arms of the Frenchman, while he cried savagely:

"Curse upon you, Dunbar Kennon, you have killed me."

"I hope not, sir, though I did drive my blade deeper than I intended."

"Monsieur, our carriage is at your disposal."

"Take me to River Vale Farm," said the wounded man, faintly, as though, fearing death, he wished to at least do justice to Di Douglass.

Paul and the servant from Cedar Hall aided the Frenchman in placing the wounded man in the carriage, which was at once driven to River Vale Farm at full speed, while Frank Fairfield's servant mounted and rode to fetch the doctor.

In a few moments the carriage returned, and entering it the father and son were driven rap-

idly back to Cloudlands, when, hastily packing his things, Dunbar Kennon bade a hasty farewell to Valerie and his father, and with Paul as his companion started to New York in the little yacht, for he deemed it best to at once leave home and rejoin his ship, in case the wound he had given Frank Fairfield should prove fatal, a wound which had brought to Di Douglass an unlooked-for revenge upon the man who had wronged her.

CHAPTER XVI.

A TREACHEROUS CREW.

NEARLY a year after the duel between Dunbar Kennon and Frank Fairfield, a vessel-of-war flying the United States flag at its peak was at anchor in a South American port.

Pacing the deck as officer in charge was a young man in whose superb form and handsome bronzed face the reader will recognize Lieutenant Dunbar Kennon.

He looks a trifle sadder than when last seen, and his face is more stern, for the brig-of-war of which he is second in command has passed through some thrilling scenes during the year past and done most gallant work.

Upon his left temple is a slight scar, made by the bullet from the farmer's pistol.

Soon a boat is seen coming off from the shore, and in it is visible, besides the two oarsmen, Paul, the faithful negro servant of the young officer.

"Any letters, Paul?" asked Lieutenant Kennon, quickly, as the negro advanced toward him after boarding the brig-of-war.

"Yes, sir, two for you, and one is from your father, the other from Missy Valerie," replied Paul, who looked just the same as he had when seated upon the carriage-box he had witnessed the duel between his master and Frank Fairfield.

"Lieutenant Snow, kindly take the deck, while I read my letters, as they are the first I have had since leaving home," said Dunbar Kennon, addressing a brother officer who just then came on deck, and who replied pleasantly:

"Certainly, lieutenant, and I don't wonder you are anxious, for I am myself, as our letters generally seem to have miscarried."

Hastening into the cabin, followed by Paul, who was anxious on his master's account, Dunbar Kennon threw himself into an easy-chair and broke the seal of his father's letter.

It was not a long one, and was dated months before, and only gave him certain news about home, without once referring to Frank Fairfield.

It told that all at Cloudlands was going on well, and that Valerie and himself were anxious to see him home again, so that it would be well if he resigned and returned as soon as he could do so.

With a sigh he laid the letter aside, saying quietly:

"There is not a word in father's letter, Paul, as to whether Fairfield died or got well. He surely must have written me before, and I never received the letter."

"Yes, sir, for Master Kennon certainly would have told you, sir, had he gotten well, or died."

"This letter is dated six months ago."

"I will see what Valerie says," and he broke the seal of the second letter.

This was dated at Cloudlands three months before, and was as follows:

"MY DEAR DUNBAR:—Your several letters received, but I knew not just where to reach you with an answer until I got your last from Monte Video."

"I write now in haste to catch the South American mail, to urge you to come home without delay, for your father is by no means well and I fear is not to be with us very long."

"He sleeps little by night, and is very nervous—so much so that he has to have an attendant with him almost constantly."

"Your duel with Fairfield affected him greatly, I fear, for he often refers to it."

"So I beg you to come home, for I shall be as my own, for I long to see you."

"If you cannot get leave, I would urge you to resign, for you remember your promise to me, to give up the sea when the day was set for me to become your wife, and I am yours whenever you come to claim me."

Your loving

"VALERIE."

"And still no word of whether Frank Fairfield be living or dead, Paul."

"This suspense is terrible," and the officer passed his hand across his eyes as though to shut out the painful memory from view.

"Yes, master, it is bad; but are you going home, sir?"

"Yes, I shall tender my resignation at once and request Captain Lowndes to allow me to sail on the ship which is now expected to touch at this port on her way to the States, so get our traps together, Paul, and I will get some boatman to run us down to the lower harbor, and then head off the vessel."

Paul seemed pleased at this decision, for he had greatly liked Cloudlands, and hastened off to obey his orders.

That night Dunbar Kennon had a long conversation with his captain, tendered his resignation, and was given permission to start home on the north-bound vessel which was then due. He left the brig-of-war early the next morn-

ing, followed by the good wishes of both his brother officers and the men, for with all he was a great favorite, and went on board a small sloop which Paul had chartered to carry them some dozen leagues to a point where they could head off the north-bound ship.

The little craft was a stanch sea boat, some twenty tons burden, and had a fairly comfortable cabin, while she could skim along over the waters like a very witch.

Her crew consisted of a skipper and two seamen, and a more villainous set of Diegos both Dunbar Kennon and Paul secretly admitted that they never had before seen.

"We must keep our eyes upon them, Paul," the sailor had said.

"Yes, sir, for they look mighty like cut-throats. It was night when we chartered the craft, sir, or I'd have picked better-looking men," Paul explained.

"You are not to blame, Paul, for all these coasters are about on a par; but as we carry considerable money, and they know it, or suspect it, we must be on our guard, that is all, for they would rob us for a peso apiece, or they belie their looks."

There was a look in Paul's face which betokened no good to the crew of the little craft if he caught them in a treacherous act.

But the skipper and his two men stuck to their work all day, and when night came hove to in the track which the vessel must take on her northward run.

The urgency with which the skipper insisted that the lieutenant should go into the cabin to sleep, again aroused the suspicions of the two passengers; but Dunbar descended into the little cabin, while Paul lay down forward, declining to go below, and in a few moments all seemed fast asleep excepting the watch upon the craft, and who was the skipper himself.

Midnight came and Lieutenant Kennon arose cautiously and peered out.

A moment more and he would have been too late to save poor Paul, for the moon had risen and revealed the skipper with a musket at his shoulder, as he leveled it at the negro, while the two seamen were creeping aft for a rush into the cabin upon him.

Quick as a flash the pistol of the young officer cracked and the skipper fell dead, while, strange retribution, in his death-grip he discharged the musket which he held, and the bullet pierced the heart of one of his two men!

Seeing the fate of his two comrades the other at once dropped upon his knees and cried for mercy, and in an instant Paul, who had awakened to a full sense of the situation, had him bound and in the hold, but not until he confessed that the captain had formed a plot to kill and rob the lieutenant and himself.

Soon after a storm swept down upon the seas, and needing the man's aid he was released from his bonds and allowed to come on deck: but the tempest broke with such violence that the little craft was driven before it far out to sea, and all the next day it was forced to scud before the storm or go under, and during the next night was struck by another fierce blow which snapped off the mast level with the deck, washed the treacherous seaman overboard and left Dunbar Kennon and Paul alone upon a wreck.

For days they drifted, until, in another tempest, which are so frequent in that latitude, the wreck was driven, as has been seen, upon the retreat of the Island Rovers, where Zulita, the Queen, rescued the brave young officer and Paul from death, and where strange scenes awaited them.

CHAPTER XVII.

FALSE OR TRUE.

WHEN Dunbar Kennon and Paul came back to the little cabin, from the cliff on the Rovers' Island, and beheld the man dead, lying half across the table where he had fallen after eating the poisoned food, they deeply regretted not having warned him.

Paul had seen Mazula put the poison in the food, which they were expected to eat, and as they had not done so, it did not then occur to either Dunbar Kennon or the negro that the man in attendance on them would eat it.

Standing in the cabin, as though just having arrived there and discovered the dead man, was Mazula, while Luka, the commander of the Fort, was also near.

"Well, what have you to say as to your work here?" said Mazula, sternly, addressing Dunbar Kennon.

"To what work do you refer, señor?"

"That red work," and Mazula pointed to the dead man.

"Do you mean to accuse me of murdering that man?" hotly asked the officer, his eyes flashing with anger.

"Yes, for Señor Luka was away, and this man was your guard, and so you sought to rid yourself of him and escape; but upon reaching the cliff you found how impossible that was and returned here pretending you do not know aught of poor Seguin's death."

"Señor Mazula, for such I believe is your name, let me say to you that I took a walk to the cliff with my man here, and we were con-

gratulating ourselves upon having escaped death, when the idea came that this man had been less fortunate, as he might have eaten food intended for us.

"We returned to prevent it, but were too late, for see, he is dead, *having partaken of poisoned food.*"

"Need I explain more, Señor Mazula?"

The Rover's face turned livid, for the words of Dunbar Kennon told him that, in some way, he had discovered that the food had been poisoned.

Had he been seen to put the poison there, he wondered?

But he had to face the matter boldly, and so he said:

"So you killed Seguin by poisoning his food, and not by a knife, as I had supposed?"

"I did nothing of the kind, Señor Mazula, as you know, and Señor Luka can discover, if he will search you for a certain *red powder that you carry.*"

"Ha! he dares accuse me, Luka, of poisoning Seguin, one of my own men."

"Do you hear his bold accusation, Luka?"

"Yes, señor, I heard it," was the reply.

"No power shall save you now, my man, you and that black dog with you, after such a charge against me."

"Not even the Queen Zulita can save you now," and Mazula wheeled upon his heel and walked rapidly away.

"Why did you accuse him of such a deed, señor?" asked Luka.

"It will only be the worse for you, as he had no motive to kill Seguin," said Luka.

"I accused him because he poisoned that food, in the absence of that poor man, who went to the store-room after coffee, and he expected my servant here and myself to eat it and die."

"Do you say this of Mazula?" quickly asked Luka.

"I do."

"You saw him put the poison in the food?"

"I saw him do it, señor," responded Paul, who spoke Spanish well, for in that language the conversation had been carried on.

"You?"

"Yes, señor."

"Where were you and when was this?"

Paul explained just what he had seen, and showed where he had hidden when Mazula entered the cabin.

Luka listened with a strange smile upon his face and then said:

"Wait here until my return."

"Do not think you can escape, for it would be impossible."

"I will report this to my Queen."

So saying Luka strode away and within ten minutes returned, accompanied not only by Zulita, but also Mazula, who had gone to her at once with his story.

She heard the accusation of Dunbar Kennon against the Señor Mazula, listened to Paul's story, and then stepped forward and coolly looked at the body of Seguin.

"There is no mark of violence upon the body, Luka?" she asked.

"None, my Queen."

"And you believe that he has died from poison?"

"Yes, my Queen."

"And Señor Mazula, do you believe him guilty?"

"How could I believe an Island Rover and a chief of our people, could do so foul a deed, my Queen?" was the evasive reply of Luka.

"And you, Señor Mazula, what have you to say?"

"I leave myself in the hands of my Queen to decide as to whether I could be guilty of a crime so foul," and Mazula bent his head before the beautiful young girl.

A moment she remained silent and then said:

"Señor Americano, I can but believe the Señor Mazula, for what motive had he in taking your life, and certainly none in poisoning poor Seguin."

"Your motive was to escape, and you sought to remove the one who stood between you and safety, as you believed; but, realizing how utterly useless was the attempt, you were forced to return here, and to shield yourself, you have charged the Señor Mazula with crime."

"Luka, see that these men are put in irons to await their fate, whenever it is determined by my people what it shall be."

Dunbar Kennon was astounded.

This then was the beautiful Queen who had protected them the night before, and who had risked her life in the surf-boat for their rescue. What could it mean?

She had gazed at him as she spoke in a way that seemed to read his very soul, and yet he could not understand the look.

Was she in earnest that they must meet some fearful fate, which she dared not attempt to avert, or was she playing a part to save them?

These thoughts flashed through his mind; as he saw her turn and walk away with Mazula, while Luka, striking a brass gong, summoned two men to his aid, who quickly brought irons and placed them upon himself and Paul.

With the irons upon them, and led away into

a prison-room, the thoughts of the young sailor and Paul were anything but pleasant.

"If that pretty lady means what she said, master, she has an angel's face and a fiend's heart," Paul bitterly declared.

"Sh, Paul, do not censure the Señorita Zulita yet awhile, though, if she does let us suffer death I will agree with you, if it is in her power to prevent it."

"But she may feel that she has no power alone against the demand of her wild and reckless people, and thus dares not attempt to save us."

"It's all that Señor Mazula's work, master."

"Yes, and I think Luka would also wish to see us put out of the way."

"To my observation he appears to be in love with his Queen, while Mazula is the favored one, and he would like to get rid of his rival and win the señorita himself, and between them all we will have to suffer."

"She's as beautiful as an angel, master, and it don't seem as though she can be wicked."

"She is beautiful, Paul, and if wicked, I would never feel that I could trust womankind again," and Dunbar Kennon lapsed into silence, for the face of the lovely young Queen had impressed him deeply.

In fact he had been more deeply impressed by Zulita than he cared to admit to himself, and had thought time and again:

"Why could not Valerie Rossmore be like this Queen of a strange people, a people who are nothing more than pirates?"

"I would that Valerie was such as she, for, somehow, I feel that this beautiful little semi-barbarian has touched my heart as no woman ever did before."

"It is strange, passing strange, these likings, loves and hates of ours, and I wish I could solve the riddle of why I would have Valerie like my Queen, for my Queen she certainly is."

Such were the thoughts that flitted through the brain of the young captive sailor, and dangerous thoughts they were for a man pledged to another.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DOOMED.

"I THOUGHT she would yield, and, willful as she is, she would not dare face the anger of our people, to protect two strangers, whom she was wrong to rescue, for let death greet all those who are not of our band, that drift upon this isle."

So said Mazula to himself, as he left the home of Zulita, whither he had gone with her, after the scene at the cabin.

He had held a talk with her upon the subject of the prisoners, pointing out to her the danger of taking strangers into their midst, and she had seemed to be convinced by his earnest arguments.

In his arguments he had said:

"Of course, my Queen, you have ruled well since the death of our King, your father."

"But there is much that you do not understand yet, and it will be my pleasure to take from you all worry and care, when you honor me by making me your husband, which will make me ruler of the Island Rovers."

"Our laws demand that no stranger, who may be driven upon our island, or captured, shall break bread with us, or sleep beneath our roofs, until he has taken the Death Oath, if we deem that we care to have him enrolled as one of us."

"If we deem otherwise, we have the right to put him to death."

"It was the aim of your grandfather, who founded the League of the Island Rovers, to add to our numbers year by year; but our laws, in doing so, allow us to choose just whom we so wish to have, and to put to them the test oath, and we are not to admit then over ten strangers in three years, so that no divisions can be sown in our midst."

"Children under five we can take at our will, so that we take none of the hated race of Portugal, or of Mexico, for our laws forbid members from those two nations, whom we are taught to hate."

"In the past six years, my Queen, seven strange men have been admitted under the bond of the Death Oath, and yet to this day few of our real Island Rovers trust them, fearing that they will escape if opportunity offers."

"I tell you these things, my Queen, as I feel that I can talk to you as no other has the right, and I beg you to allow me to see that these two men, the white Americano and the black, are put to death, for they are dangerous, I assure you."

"What says my Queen?"

"I leave all in your hands, Señor Mazula; but they must be allowed to take the Death Oath, if so they will," answered Zulita.

"You wish this, my Queen?"

"Yes; for, having saved their lives myself, I wish that they should have the right to live, if they will take the Death Oath."

"The black may do so, but the other is an officer of the American Navy, and he will die first, I feel assured."

"He shall have the chance at least, Mazula."

"As my Queen wishes."

"And more."

"Yes, my Queen."

"Should they refuse to take the Death Oath, thus condemning themselves to death, I wish their execution delayed until after the three days of my birthday *fête*, which begins to-morrow, for I would not have it shadowed by an execution on its eve."

"I can understand that, my Queen."

"Now go and do your duty, Señor Mazula, calling the Wise Men together to report the death of Seguin and also that there are two shipwrecked men who are to be allowed the test of the Death Oath."

"I obey, my Queen."

And Mazula left the presence of Zulita with a triumphant smile upon his face, for he had succeeded beyond his expectations.

Hardly had he gone when Zulita called to her maid Lazuli.

"Yes, my Queen."

And the pretty maiden appeared before her.

"Go to the Fort and manage to place this in the hands of the white señor there, but let no one see you do so."

"I leave this to your woman's wit, Lazuli, to accomplish for me."

And she handed to the pretty maid a slip of paper.

Lazuli placed upon her head a pretty sun-bat of her own making, and singing a Spanish song started forth upon her mission.

She found quite a crowd of people at the Fort, and there was wailing among the immediate kindred of Seguin, whom they were bearing away to his cabin.

Lazuli watched them depart, and when the crowd had all disappeared she sought Luka and said:

"Where are the prisoners, Señor Luka?"

"In the stronghold, pretty Lazuli."

"The white señor wears a ring which I have a fancy to possess, so may I get it from him, good señor?"

"Once a prisoner enters the stronghold, pretty Lazuli, he is as doomed, and only the Death Oath can release him from there, unless it be to walk forth to execution, so I would hardly dare let you venture in."

"But I would have the ring, Señor Luka."

"I might yield, pretty Lazuli, for a kiss from your red lips; but suppose he refuses to give it up, I cannot ask him, as a condemned man is sacred among us, Lazuli."

"If he gives it not up, Señor Luka, at my request, I will say no more."

"Then give me the kiss, Lazuli, and if your pretty face does not make him yield the ring, I am much mistaken."

Lazuli raised her pouting lips, received the kiss, taking good care to hide the fact that it was distasteful to her, and while Luka remained at the door she entered the stronghold.

Dunbar Kennon started slightly at seeing her, in the dim light at first supposing her to be the Queen; but she left him no time for conjecture, as she walked toward him and said aloud:

"Señor, you wear a ring which I noticed last night and have a fancy to possess. May I ask it of you?"

The shadow of Luka at the half-open door was seen by Dunbar Kennon, when Lazuli pointed in that direction, and he saw that she raised her voice as though for the officer to hear her words.

At the same moment she thrust into his hand the piece of paper given to her by Zulita.

"You can have the ring if you wish it, my sweet girl. Here it is," and the sailor took from his finger a ring of massive gold, with a red stone, in which was cut a shield, the crest of his family.

"I thank you, señor," and instantly the maiden turned and left the room, while she said exultantly to Luka:

"See, I got it."

"Yes, your face would win you Paradise, Lazuli."

"But do not whisper that I allowed you to enter the stronghold."

"A woman can keep a secret, señor, when it is necessary," was the laughing reply, and Lazuli returned to her mistress, while Dunbar Kennon read on the paper simply the words:

"Refuse to take the Death Oath and be condemned to die."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE THREE WISE MEN.

MAZULA felt that he had triumphed, and that he would remove the man he feared as a dangerous rival out of the way.

He had little fear that Dunbar Kennon, as a United States naval officer, would accept his life by taking the fearful Death Oath demanded by the Island Rovers to one who would join their league.

In his voyages, for he was the commodore of the little fleet of the Rovers, Mazula had heard of the honor of American sailors, and was assured that the officer then a prisoner on the island would die rather than ally himself to a band of men who he knew were regarded as pirates, whatever they might in reality be.

This would settle the fate of Dunbar Kennon, his rival, for his death must follow his refusal,

and as for Paul the young Rover captain did not care, but rather hoped that he would take the test oath and then he would make him his servant.

But the cunning young chief wished to take into consideration what was to be done, should Dunbar Kennon take the oath.

So he puzzled his brain in trying to see what should be done, for, did Dunbar Kennon ally himself, by his oath, to the Island Rovers, then he would still remain as a rival to the young chief and might prove a dangerous one.

"The Wise Men will aid me to a plot," he muttered, and he wended his way to the Tribunal Hall.

Now in this Tribunal Hall were wont to sit an hour each day a trio of dignitaries who were known as the "Three Wise Men."

Their duties consisted in settling the petty disputes that arose, punishing for offenses committed by the Rovers, and relieving the ruler of all petty affairs, though they also could condemn to death and punish any one except the Queen and the heads of the fleet and forts on the island.

These were subject only to the power of the Queen, and it was in her power to pardon one condemned by the Three Wise Men.

So to this trio of judges went Mazula, and he found them sitting in judgment upon a few minor cases, which at his request were quickly disposed of.

The Trio were over three-score years, for no one could be a Wise Man until he had passed his sixtieth year.

Their hair and beards were white, giving them the looks of patriarchs, and they had a serious cast of countenance as became judges.

Knowing that Mazula was to become their king, by marriage with their Queen, in a few short months, they were anxious to please him, while they also held high respect for him as commandant of the military forces and fleet.

"What would our chief say to us?" asked the senior judge when he had dismissed those present.

"I have sought you, señors, to ask your advice upon an important matter," was the reply.

The Three Wise Men bowed and remained in attentive silence to hear more.

"You are aware, señor," resumed Mazula, "that our Queen rescued from death last evening two men, an American señor, and his slave, a negro."

They bowed assent, and Mazula went on:

"These men, our Queen permitted to live through the night, breaking, as she has a right, the law that no stranger must tread or sleep beneath our roof until he has taken the Death Oath."

"Feeling that our Queen knew not this law, and not wishing a curse to fall upon our people by the presence of strangers unhallowed by the oath, I sought to execute them, when our Queen appeared and demanded their release until today."

"Now I have come to say that they are in the stronghold, under the charge of murder, but the Queen has given them permission to take the Death Oath, and if they do so, they are free, are they not?"

The trio of dignitaries bowed in affirmation. "It is for you then, señors, to administer the Death Oath."

"It shall be done," said the senior Wise Man.

"Then they become as though they were Island Rovers, with all the privileges and rights of our people?"

"Yes, Señor Captain."

"But, señor, I have certain reasons for believing this American naval officer to be a dangerous personage to intrust with the secrets of our league."

The Americans look upon us as pirates, their cruisers have been our worst foes, as far as watching the movement of our fleet vessels is concerned, and this prisoner might be willing to perjure himself for the purpose of betraying us.

"He is a skilled sailor, and might he not prove treacherous?"

"Your point is well taken, Señor Captain," said the senior of the Wise Men, and his two colleagues agreed with him—in fact the Trio never disagreed.

"It would be well, then, señors, to consider a plan to get rid of this American as soon as he is one of us, if he becomes so by taking the Death Oath."

"Yes, señor."

"Now, I wish to make known that this morning in the fort a strange circumstance occurred. Señor Luka's cook at the fort was preparing breakfast for the señor and his slave, when they, evidently rising early, sought to escape in some way, fearing to trust in the promise of our Queen."

"Señor Luka was on his rounds of the other forts, and Seguin was alone at the kitchen cabin, and I there found him dead some time after."

"To my surprise they accused me of poisoning the food, to get rid of them, and, Seguin eating it, died; but my idea is that they poisoned it to get Seguin out of the way so that they could attempt to escape, as they knew not the utter impossibility of escaping from this island as we know it."

"The Queen at once dismissed their charge against me and had Señor Luka put them in irons, and yet she will allow them to take the Test Oath, if so she will."

"If they do, they become Island Rovers, and thus can be at once brought before you upon a charge of poisoning Seguin, and I think I can find some one who can vouch for their having done so."

"If two can be found to prove it, they can at once be condemned by you, sentenced and executed, while the Queen need know nothing about it until it is all over."

"It can be done, Señor Captain; but has our Queen any reason for wishing to spare these men?"

"None, señor, other than a sentiment from having saved their lives."

"I see; but when shall the Test Oath be administered to them?"

"I shall have them brought before you at noon."

"And the charge of murdering our brother Seguin?"

"Can be made at once after they have taken the oath, so that they can be at once executed, so that you can have your executioner here in readiness."

"Yes; but what if they refuse to take the oath?"

"Then that will condemn them and they can be led back to the stronghold and made to take the Death Leap in Irons."

"True, and thus we will get rid of them at once."

"No, not until after the three days' fête of the Queen's birthday anniversary, which begins at sunset to-night, señors, as you know, for she will not have an execution during that time, and you know that the Death Leap in Irons can only be taken at the hour of midnight."

"They will have three days' respite, then?"

"If they do not take the oath, yes, señors; but if they do, they can at once be tried for Seguin's murder and executed before you here, between the hours of twelve and one, and before the festival, which will begin at sunset."

"Señor, we sit in justice to obey your bidding," said the senior of the Wise Men, and Mazula left the Tribunal confident that whether Dunbar Kennon took the Death Oath or not, he was doomed, for if he did he would die within three hours, and if not, within three days.

So with joy in his heart at the near fate of a man whom he feared as a rival, he sought the Fort to order Luka to send the prisoners before the Tribunal of the Three Wise Men to take the Test Oath.

Ten minutes after, with Luka only as their escort, Dunbar Kennon and Paul were on their way to face the Tribunal of the Island Rovers.

CHAPTER XX.

BEFORE THE TRIBUNAL.

THE Island Rovers were a strange people.

They took life as it came, and all happenings in their midst as a matter of fact.

They had heard that their Queen, standing on a rocky lookout above the lagoon, had seen a wreck coming ashore and on it two men, and she had gone through the surf and rescued them when their craft went to pieces on the reef.

They knew that she had done just what they would have expected of her, for the Island Rovers were trained from infancy to know no fear.

They had heard that she had protected these men and given them the chance to become Island Rovers.

They had also heard that Seguin was dead, one of their people, and that he had been murdered by the strangers.

The family of the murdered man bewailed, but all left the matter calmly to their Queen or the Three Wise Men to settle.

They were indeed a strange people, for there was no excitement among them, and men and women went about their occupation or pleasure as usual, and the children went to their play perfectly contented.

They were a hardy, fearless set.

Men with strong limbs, brave hearts, bronzed skins and willing to do or dare, while no better sailors skimmed the seas.

There were women among them Venuslike in form, and with faces of rare beauty, while among themselves they were a good people, true as steel, honest and just.

They loved gold and they loved dress, the men as well as the women, the children as well as their mothers, and they reveled in wearing jewels and hoarding up treasure.

Where all these jewels and treasure came from was their secret, and they kept it to themselves. A thousand souls all told, they had for the protection of the island a force of two hundred brawny men, while their half-dozen of armed vessels were manned by as many more.

There were other vessels, not armed, manned by boys and youths, but these were craft for carrying the Rovers from island to island when they chose to change their place of abode.

Then there was a trader or two to run into ports here and there for needed supplies, and yet no one seeing such craft suspected it of belonging to an Island Rover.

Thus leaving their ruler and her lieutenants, The Three Wise Men, Captain Mazula and Señor Luka to manage affairs, the rest of the Island Rovers took life as it came.

Zulita's grandfather had founded the band, it was said from the crew of his pirate vessel and captains, and his son had become their king when the old chief died.

At his death, with Zulita his only child, she became their Queen, and no one would have dared doubt her authority.

She was but a girl in years, but her father had taken her to various ports in the trading crafts and taught her much, so that she had seen something of the world.

Beautiful as she was, and a kind ruler, her people loved her, and they had wished to select for her as a husband one worthy of her.

Thus Mazula had been decided upon by the Three Wise Men, and his rivals had yielded in silence to the choice as irrevocable, though Luka had grieved bitterly in his heart that he had not won his beautiful Queen, for he dearly loved her, while also his heart was full of ambition to become King of the Island Rovers under such pleasant circumstances.

That there were black sheep among the flock, where rivalry in love was the foundation, has been shown from the fact that Mazula sought to get Dunbar Kennon out of the way, while Luka had urged the young sea chief on, hoping that it would cause Zulita to break with him.

So stood matters on the lone retreat of the Island Rovers, when our unfortunate hero and the faithful Paul were conducted by Luka to the Tribunal.

Their going down the vale among the cabins created only a passing glance, and Luka needed no guard, for none was necessary.

Both the officer and his servant were in irons, and yet they walked proudly along, even though it should be to their death.

The Tribunal, as the place was called where the Wise Men sat, was a round cabin, some twenty-five feet in diameter.

It was painted black without, even to the thatched roof, which rose to a peak, above which was a staff bearing a black flag in the center of which was a red sword.

Within the building was painted red, and had but one door and no windows, the light coming in from skylights in the roof.

Opposite to the door were three seats, and in there sat the Three Wise Men, their backs against the wall, and their chairs raised upon a round dais some five feet high.

At the front of this dais was a block, and above it the hideous guillotine, with its heavy knife suspended.

There were also instruments for lesser punishment, such as stocks, a grating for strapping a man on to be lashed, as on shipboard with the cat-o'-nine-tails some year ago, whips and manacles.

There was also a row of coffins around the walls, all ready for occupants.

With such frightful sights within the walls of that "Round-House of Justice," it was not to be wondered at that the Island Rovers were careful not to break the adamant laws.

The walls were thick, and when the one door was closed, no sound could be heard from without.

On that guillotine men had died, condemned to death by the Wise Men, and punishments of other kinds had been administered rigidly, while from off the cliff prisoners falling into the hands of the Island Rovers had walked to their death, taken the Death Leap enveloped in chains to sink them to the bottom of the sea.

And all these dread secrets this strange people, Rovers of the sea from island to island, wherever they chose to make their homes, had kept all these secrets locked within their hearts.

It was to this tribunal that Dunbar Kennon and Paul were led by Luka.

They entered the door and it closed behind them, seeming to shut them forever out from the world.

They looked about them, and, brave as he was, Paul shuddered and became of ashen hue; but Dunbar Kennon let not a muscle in his face quiver, whatever his emotions were.

They saw there the Three Wise Men in their red robes, and there were present also half a dozen others of the Island League.

But Mazula was not present, and this was a relief to the prisoners, who did not know his cunning nature.

Luka placed them before the Tribunal, Dunbar Kennon in front of Paul, and bowing low he said in Spanish:

"Señors of Justice and Wisdom, I come before you with these two men, an American señor and his slave, who were wrecked upon the reef and brought ashore by our brave Queen, who permits them to appear here to take the Test Oath of allegiance, if so they will."

"Señors of Justice, they are in your hands."

So saying Luka stepped back, and the silence that followed was painful in the extreme.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DEATH OATH.

JUST as Paul felt that he would rather fight the Three Wise Men, and all present, rather

than endure such appalling suspense, the silence was broken by the deep voice of the senior of the trio, asking:

"Who are you?"

"Men," was the abrupt response of Dunbar Kennon.

"We have eyes to see that much; but from whence come you?" tartly said the senior.

"From America."

"What are you?"

"I am an officer of the navy of the United States."

"And the other?"

"Ask him."

"When his time comes I will."

"From whence are you come of late?"

"From my vessel, which is stationed on the coast."

"Why are you here?"

"Because it was beyond my power to prevent, as we were blown out to sea in a gale and dismantled, our wreck was driven upon the reef surrounding this island, where we were saved by her whom you call your Queen."

"You have broken bread and slept beneath our roof, through the clemency of our Queen?"

"So I believe, señor."

"By the same clemency you are allowed to take the Death Oath and become one of our people, if so you wish."

"What is this Death Oath?"

"One that accurses you, living or dead, be it broken, and one which is a curse if it be taken simply through fear to save life and from no desire to become one of us and yield allegiance to our laws."

"It must be a fearful oath, then."

"You shall hear it, and then it is for you to decide whether you are to take it or refuse."

"If I take the oath, what then?"

"You become an Island Rover, with equal rights with us all."

"If I refuse?"

"You will be loaded with chains and made to walk at midnight over the cliff at the north of this island."

"We came very near taking that walk last night," said Dunbar Kennon with a light laugh, which amazed the Trio at his wonderful nerve.

"The clemency of our Queen saved you then."

"It will not again?"

"No."

"Repeat the Test Oath, then, señor, that I may hear it," and folding his manacled arms upon his broad breast, the young sailor looked calmly into the faces of the Tribunal, and his whole manner was unmoved by the appalling surroundings, which, however, impressed Paul with deepest awe, begotten by the superstition of his race.

"The oath, Señor Americano, is no idle one, as you will see, for it binds you irrevocably to misfortune should you break it, or utter it with only intent to save your life and no desire to become one of us."

"Your name, señor, please?"

"Dunbar Kennon."

"Your rank?"

"A lieutenant in the United States Navy."

"Your age?"

"Twenty-six."

"The oath, then, señor, as you would say it, would be as follows:

"I, Dunbar Kennon, twenty-six years of age, an American, and a lieutenant in the navy of the United States, do hereby pledge my word that I desire to become a member of the League of the Island Rovers, and I swear before high heaven that I have this desire from no wish to save my life, but because it is my purpose to become a Sea Rover."

"I hereby vow, in the presence of good and evil, under the skies of high Heaven, by the sun, moon, and stars, by life and death, by all that I hold sacred, by my creed of religion, by my hopes of heaven, that I will keep secret all the deeds of the Island Rovers, be they good deeds, or guilty ones, that I will submit to the Queen and her officers, obey all laws without remonstrance or hesitation, and hold body and soul ready for sacrifice for the good of the people I now become one of."

"Falling in my duties, making this oath, I hereby pray high Heaven to make me accursed among men, to torture my waking hours with bitter memories, to rack my body with disease, and to bring hideous nightmares to my sleeping hours."

"Breaking this, my oath of fealty to the Island Rovers' League, I pray high Heaven to give me no rest on earth, no hope hereafter, and to bring me to a death of violent torture, and that upon my children and children's children may fall the curse of my broken vow."

In a deep voice, and amid a silence that was intense, broken only by the tones of the senior Wise Man, this fearful vow was repeated to Dunbar Kennon.

That his face whitened it is not to be wondered at, but that alone showed how deeply he felt the power of the awful Death Oath.

As for Paul, he trembled violently, for the surroundings impressed him with fear, when, without he would have faced boldly any danger or death.

"You have heard the Death Oath, señor?" said the senior judge.

"I have, and I think it just such a diabolical oath as is needed to bind together a band of outlaws, such as you are," was the bold response.

"You refuse to take it, then?" asked the Wise Man, without showing any anger at the words of the sailor.

"Emphatically I do."

"And your slave?"

"He has heard all, so let him speak for himself."

"I will do as my master does," answered Paul, quietly.

"You both know the penalty of refusal?"

"You told it to us, I believe."

"To walk in irons over the north cliff into the sea below?"

"Yes."

"You prefer such death?"

"I do."

"And you?" and the Senior Wise Man turned to Paul, who promptly answered:

"To life or death, señor, I follow my master."

"Enough, then, for your doom is sealed."

"Señor Luka, remove these two men to the stronghold, there keeping them until sunset of the third day from this, when our Queen's birthday fête closes."

"Then, the midnight following call upon Morte, the executioner, to march them to their death over the cliff."

"You have your orders."

"They shall be obeyed, most worthy Wise Men," replied Luka, with a low bow, and he led the sailor and his servant out of the place, the others present also departing, and again Dunbar Kennon and Paul found themselves in the strong-room of the Fort on the cliff.

Hardly had they left the Tribunal when Mazula entered and appeared before the Three Wise Men.

"Well, señors?"

"They refused the oath, so have been doomed to take the Death Leap, Señor Captain."

"When?"

"At midnight the third from to-night, señor."

"It is well," and Mazula left the Tribunal with a gleam of malignant joy upon his face, while he muttered:

"I shall be glad when he is dead, for I am sure that he has made a deep impression upon Queen Zulita, for she seems like a different woman."

"I wish I could understand her."

Alas! perplexed Mazula, mankind have wished your wish since the world began.

CHAPTER XXII.

A QUEEN IN LOVE.

THE three days' fête in honor of the Queen's birthday anniversary consisted in dancing, singing, playing games, swimming and rowing matches, and the presentation of souvenirs to the fair young ruler from her loyal subjects, the Island Rovers.

It began at sunset the day but one before the anniversary, and lasted until the same hour the day following.

A grand chorus of voices opened the fête, and the whole band of Islanders marched to the home of their Queen singing a song in her praise.

It was midnight when she retired to her room, utterly worn out, it seemed, for she looked worried and tired throughout the opening ordeal.

"Lazuli!"

"Yes, my Queen," and Lazuli approached her mistress, who had thrown herself down in an easy-chair as though utterly prostrated.

"You love Harman, the master of the Spray, do you not?"

Lazuli looked a little startled at this question, though it was known to all that she did love the handsome young captain of the Spray, the fleetest of all the little vessels belonging to the Island Rovers' squadron.

"Yes, my Queen."

"How does love affect you, Lazuli?"

"Is not my Queen in love with the handsome Captain Mazula, so that she may know the feeling of what I cannot express?"

"No!"

"Not in love with the Señor Mazula?" and Lazuli's pretty brows were arched in amazement.

"I thought I was until two days ago, Lazuli."

"And now, my Queen?"

"I hate him."

"Oh, my Queen!"

"I do, I am certain, for now I think I know what love is."

"Oh, my Queen! it is the Señor Luka, commander of the forts you love?"

"No."

"One of the captains of your fleet of cruisers then, my Queen?" asked Lazuli, who was a most privileged person with her mistress, and who knew all the state secrets.

"No, Lazuli."

"Then I cannot guess who has won my Queen's heart."

"Can I trust you, Lazuli?"

"Oh, my Queen! can you not, with life and

all?" and Lazuli dropped upon her knees before the young ruler of the Island Rovers.

"It is with the stranger, Lazuli."

"Ah! the American sailor?"

"Yes."

"He is so grand and handsome, my Queen?"

"Yes, and so brave, for when I went to his rescue he first aided his slave into the boat. He has won my heart, Lazuli."

"I wonder not, my Queen; but he is to die."

"So the Wise Men said."

"The third night from this, for he refused to take the Death Oath."

"I wonder not at it, when he is the man he is; but the slip of paper you bore to him, Lazuli, bade him refuse to take it."

"Ah!" and the one word expressed a great deal from Lazuli.

For a moment the Queen was silent, and then said:

"Lazuli, living here as I have, I knew not what love was, and so believed that I loved Mazula."

"This man, this stranger, was being driven ashore, and I stood alone on the rock and saw his wrecked craft coming to destruction."

"I had stood before and seen men thus come to their death, and only pity had come into my heart for them, with a feeling of relief that they, dead, could not betray us."

"But a strange impulse urged me to go to the rescue of that wreck, and the moment I met the eyes of that handsome American I felt that he was one to sway my life."

"I loved him with all my soul, it seemed, and hatred for Señor Mazula began to fill my heart."

"I saw the stranger as he appeared last night, loaded with chains and facing the Death Drop, and he did not flinch."

"I saw his look of amazement this morning when I had him put in irons and sided with Señor Mazula, yet he showed no fear."

"He is as brave as men can be, and when I looked into his eyes I felt that I could win his love."

"I know that he spoke the truth, and that Señor Mazula put the poison in the food, for I was on the deck of my ship-home here and saw Captain Mazula go to the cabin and enter it, while those men were on the cliff."

"I know that Mazula has read my secret and hopes to get the American at once out of his way."

"Now, Lazuli, the stranger must not die."

"But, my Queen, your power, even, is not great enough to release a man from the sentence of the Death Leap, unless in the end he takes the Oath."

"True; but I can rescue him, and I will, Lazuli."

"Oh, my Queen! is it not death for a ruler of the Island Rovers to break a law?"

"It is."

"You frighten me, my Queen."

"Be calm, Lazuli, for I need your aid."

"I will gladly risk all for you, my Queen."

"That man and his slave must not die, Lazuli."

"You have said it, my Queen."

"There is but one way to save them."

"Yes, my Queen; but I see no way."

"I do, for I have busied my brain to think up a plot. Lazuli, I have seen enough of the outside world to understand that the lives we live here are not honest."

"We are regarded as pirates, and though, as Mazula's wife, I would never have fretted against my lot, and lived on here forever, perhaps, yet as I love the American señor, as I now do, I am anxious to fly from here forever."

"Oh! my Queen, they would track you to the ends of the earth," said Lazuli, in a tone of horror.

Zulita was silent for a moment, and then said:

"I know that such is our law, and I do not doubt but that they would try to find me; but, Lazuli, I love that man, and if he will take me with him I will fly from here."

"You, Lazuli, love Harman, I know, and he is not at heart an Island Rover, I feel assured, for he took the Death Oath six years ago to save his life."

"Your father did the same when you were a little child, and you both fell captives into the hands of our people, so that I know that you, too, have wished to be away from here, for, your father being dead, you are alone now and have kindred far from here."

"Now, Lazuli, I have noted one thing which has escaped the keen eyes of the Three Wise Men and of all our people, and that is that your lover, the handsome Harman, has for his crew four men who have taken the Death Oath as he did."

"Oh, my Queen!"

"It is true, for he has not a real Island Rover with him, and this can mean but one thing—escape in the end."

"My Queen!"

"His vessel is the fleetest, she is always in the best of trim, and he volunteered for the courier work between our cruising vessels, which other captains wish to shun as a hard and thankless task."

"This carries the spray to sea to-morrow, and I have thought, Lazuli, that he would on some such voyage never return, carrying you with him, and letting the Rovers believe he had deserted the League or been lost in a tornado."

"Am I near the truth, Lazuli?"

"My Queen, Harman has asked me to be his wife, and said that he would take me with him on the voyage that followed our marriage."

"But, on Lazuli's honor, my Queen, he has not said that he wished me to run off with him."

"Oh, no; he is too shrewd for that."

"And yet, if on the voyage he said he would not return, you would be willing."

"Where Harman would go, my Queen, I would go, be the consequences what they might."

"Well said, Lazuli."

"You are really in love, I see."

"But to return to Harman."

"Yes, my Queen."

"You must see him early in the morning."

"Yes, my Queen."

"And you are to see the American to-morrow for me."

"I will obey, my Queen."

"Now let us retire, for I need sleep, as my brain and heart are all in a whirl, for, Lazuli, I intend to risk everything for love."

CHAPTER XXIII.

PUT TO THE TEST.

THE lagoon which flowed into the island of the Rovers was in reality a deep, narrow cove, though the springs and brooks of the isle emptied into it.

It was a ship's length in width at the entrance, and for a hundred yards, and then made its way around the point of a cliff, when it narrowed to forty feet.

This bend around the cliff gave it the appearance of going no further inland, and thus formed beyond a narrow, deep, and long haven for the fleet of the Rovers.

As has been described, there were scores of craft there, from surf-skiffs to small armed cruisers, and all in perfect trim.

Paths led along the lagoon into the interior of the island, where the homes of the Rovers were, and through which flowed a small brook as clear as crystal, fed by scores of springs in the hills.

Leaving the lagoon, a vessel had to sail half-around the island, between it and the encircling reef, to pass out through the latter at the break opposite the north cliff, or Death Leap Cliff as it was more often called, upon which was a fort, the guns of which were hidden from the view of passing vessels, but which, from their commanding appearance, could pour a heavy fire upon an incoming enemy.

At another point of the island, also commanding the approach, was another fort of three guns, and should a vessel-of-war manage to pass there, at the lagoon on either side, guns were mounted to beat back a foe, so that a fleet of frigates would have hard work to successfully attack the island of the Rovers, even if they had pilots on board to bring them within the waters inside of the reef.

Within the lagoon, on the morning following the conversation between Queen Zulita and Lazuli, lay a pretty little craft of a build and rig known in West Indian waters as a *goleta*.

From hull to trunk she was trim and roomy looking, and though about thirty tons burden only, carried a spread of canvas which many a larger vessel could not stand up under.

Upon her decks was but one person, her skillful crew of four men having gone up to the enjoyment of the festivities of their Queen's birthday.

That one was a handsome young man, whose appearance indicated that he was of French origin.

Slight in form, he was graceful, and wore his sailor uniform of white duck pants and blue shirt with the air of a dandy sailor.

But there was that in his face which proved he was brave and resolute.

"Ho, Señor Harman, good-morning," cried a sweet voice from the shore, and in an instant the young skipper had doffed his tarpaulin, thrown a kiss from the tips of his fingers and called out:

"In a moment, sweet Lazuli, I will be with you."

He gave his black silk necktie a better twist, smoothed his chestnut curls, set his tarpaulin more jauntily upon his head and sprang into a tiny skiff alongside, sculling it ashore with skill and rapidity.

Upon the shore, in the shelter of a pine, stood Lazuli, and there was no other person within sight, the rest of the fleet being further up the lagoon, and in fact all of their crews had gone up to join in the festivities.

"This was kind of you, indeed, sweet Lazuli," said the young sailor, as he grasped the girl's hand and kissed it, little dreaming that the gallant Captain Luka had pressed her lips the day before in return for a favor rendered her; but then, that was Lazuli's little secret all to herself.

"I came to see you, Señor Harman, upon an important matter."

"You look troubled, my Lazuli, and the rose has gone from your cheeks."

"I am anxious, Harman, and I have come to you to know if I can trust you."

"With your life, Lazuli."

"When do you sail as courier to the cruisers now out, Harman?"

"This afternoon."

"In time to be out of sight of the island soon after dark?"

"Yes; but what do you mean?"

"You have a crew of four men?"

"Yes."

"Who are they?"

"Ramsey, Leon, Corlis and Du Bose."

"What are they?"

"Island Rovers, of course."

"I mean who were they?"

"Their nationality?"

"Yes."

"Ramsey was an American, Leon a Spaniard, and Corlis and Du Bose were French."

"None of them true Rovers?"

He started at the words, but said:

"If you mean that none of them were *born* Rovers, it is true, Lazuli, but they have all taken the oath, as I have, and are now Island Rovers."

"It was an oath, say what you will, to save life, so should not be binding."

"Why, Lazuli, what do you mean?"

"You fairly frighten me."

"Harman, you have asked me to be your wife?"

"Yes."

"You have asked me to take my bridal cruise with you, when our Wise Men shall have married us?"

"Yes."

"I wish to go with you to-morrow."

"Oh, Lazuli!"

"I wish you to go out to sea this afternoon, remain out of sight of the island all to-morrow, but approach it when it is dark, coming as near as you think you can without being seen."

"Lay to off the North Beacon Rock, and a boat will join you there."

"A boat, Lazuli?" asked the surprised sailor.

"Yes."

"With you in it?"

"Yes, and three others."

"Ah! but who?"

"You must trust me, Harman."

"I do."

"If I bring with me three others, you must be prepared to sail with them, never to return."

"Ah, Lazuli! what deep plot is this you are in?"

"You can make me your wife then, Harman, if you will never return here; but you must know if you can fully trust your crew of four men."

"I can trust them."

"And I can trust you?"

"Implicitly, Lazuli."

"Then prepare yourself to depart forever from the Rovers' Island, for I have long felt that you have wished to go."

"You have read my inmost thoughts, Lazuli; but whisper them not here," and the sailor glanced anxiously about him.

"Good-by, Harman, and remember, to-morrow night, off the North Beacon Rock, calm or storm."

"I shall not forget, Lazuli," and the young man watched her departure with a strange feeling throbbing in his heart, a burning desire to be free surging through his brain.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE UNKNOWN EXECUTIONER.

"SEÑOR RAMON, the Queen Zulita would speak with you!"

So spoke Lazuli, an hour after her meeting with her sailor lover upon the shores of the lagoon.

The man she addressed started slightly, and said:

"The Queen would see me, Lazuli?"

"Yes, Señor Ramon, and she bade me tell you to come to her audience-room at noon to-day."

"I will be there, Lazuli," and the man walked away.

He was a man of ordinary stature, yet one that denoted strength and activity, and he had passed two-score and ten years of his life.

His face was bold, firm as a rock in expression, and his eyes had a certain look as though he lived more in the past than in the present.

He was well dressed, dwelt alone in his cabin, for he had no kindred on the island, and was held in some awe by the people, as he was versed in medicine and surgery, and held the rank of doctor to the Rovers.

A man of few words, he kept to himself, and since the death of the old king, Zulita's father, he had not had an intimate friend.

At noon he wended his way to the "Flagship," as the young Queen's home was called by the Rovers.

Down in the village all was gayety, and sing-

ing, dancing and music was being indulged in with great gusto by all, whom love of enjoyment lured thither, and the Island Rovers were very fond of sport.

At the door of the home of Zulita, Señor Ramon was met by Lazuli, who ushered him into the private audience chamber, which was situated in what would be the poop deck of a vessel.

"Señor Ramon, be seated," said Zulita.

"You look pale, my Queen, and are ill. You need my aid, for these festivities have been too much for you?" said the man with some anxiety of tone.

"Señor, I have sent for you upon a most important matter, for I need your aid, though I am not ill," said Zulita impressively.

"You have but to command, my Queen, and Ramon obeys."

"I believe that I can trust you, señor, and I will prove it; but let me show you that I know something of your history."

"My history, my Queen?"

"Yes, you were my father's most intimate friend, so much so, in truth, that it was you whom he hoped would be selected as my husband, the future king of his people, though you are more than double my age."

The man's face flushed, and then he turned pale; but he uttered no word and Zulita resumed:

"I feel that it was a disappointment to you, though you never showed it, and I have respected you, señor, as my father's friend and for yourself."

"I know that you were saved by my father from the gallows, and I know that you from that day, became his friend and ally."

"I know, also, that our laws demanded that no one, except the King who appoints, shall know who the executioner of the Island Rovers is."

"I know that the King secretly appoints a man from our people, and that no one can even suspect who he is, so securely are his tracks covered up and so thoroughly is he disguised."

"When there is to be an execution, a sign is posted upon the door of the Tribunal, where all can read it, and at the hour when he is needed, the executioner appears, from no one knows where, so thoroughly disguised in his red suit and mask that no one could recognize him."

"If he is needed at odd times, Captain Luka, or the Three Wise Men, according to who needs him, have but to sound the tocsin and he appears."

"Is not this true, Señor Ramon?"

"It is, my Queen," and the man seemed a trifle nervous.

"Now, señor, not one of my people suspects who the present executioner is. He was appointed by my father, twelve years ago, and not caring to know, until I had to do so by making another appointment, I allowed him to remain."

"But, Señor Ramon, I know who the *Señor Morte* is."

"You know, my Queen?"

And the man sprang to his feet, while his face became livid.

"I do. You are the executioner!"

The man started and paced to and fro under deep excitement, while Zulita regarded him attentively for a moment.

With a mighty effort Señor Ramon controlled his emotion, and turning to Zulita said, in a low, deep voice:

"My Queen, I confess all that you say to me, even that I longed to be the one who was to be chosen for your husband, for I love you. I had hoped that you would not know me as *Señor Morte*, the executioner, or Man in Red, as they call me, because it is an appalling office to hold, and I feared that you would dread and abhor me."

"But you now know me as I am, and I await your commands."

"I do not abhor you, Señor Ramon, for on the contrary I respect and like you."

"As my father's friend you did his bidding only, and I would now ask you if I can trust you as he did?"

"Even more, my Queen," was the earnest reply.

"Do you not tire of living here among these people, when so well fitted to dwell elsewhere and win fame for yourself?"

"My Queen, circumstances made me a wanderer."

"I fled from home, and a brand is upon me which I can never erase, so I would remain here until I die."

"If you could leave here, on a mission for me?"

"Send another, my Queen, for my duty is here among my victims."

And he spoke bitterly.

"Suppose I made a request of you to aid others to leave here, would you do as I asked?"

"Gladly, my Queen."

"But your oath?"

"My Queen first, then my oath."

"I thank you."

"How can I serve you, my Queen?"

"You know those prisoners?"

"The brave American señor and his slave?"

"Yes."

"I know them, and I feel for that brave man, for you saved his life, and he is one who possesses power above his kind in a remarkable degree."

"He showed wondrous nerve when facing the Death Leap, and so did his slave who showed well the training of his fearless and noble master."

"I do not wish them to die, Señor Ramon."

"I am glad to hear you say so, my Queen, for to execute them would haunt even my conscience."

"I wish you to save them."

"Alas! how can it be?"

"If I show you the way will you?"

"I will obey you, my Queen."

"Against your oath, all fear and the people?"

"Against anything, my Queen."

"To-morrow night those men are to die, at midnight."

"So they are sentenced, my Queen."

"Luka is to go with them, and the executioner is to do his work."

"Meaning me, my Queen?"

"Yes."

"Your orders, my Queen?"

"Remember, I trust you, Señor Ramon."

"I would die of torture and never betray you, my Queen."

"If Señor Luka were ill and sent word to you to execute those men, you alone would go with them to the cliff?"

"Yes, my Queen."

"You would report that they took the Death Leap in irons?"

"Yes, my Queen."

"Suppose that instead they were lowered over the cliff upon the rocky shelf to the right, where there is a path leading around toward the lagoon, and a boat should be waiting at the tree several hundred yards from the lagoon for them, and thus they could make their escape?"

"It can be done, my Queen, but then a boat is too small for them to trust themselves afloat in, in these treacherous waters."

"A boat could run out through the reef unseen, especially during this season of festival, and a vessel, say like the Spray, which sails to-day, could be off the island a couple of leagues, near Beacon Rock, awaiting it."

"Ah! it is well planned, my Queen, and could be done."

"And the men could be reported as having taken the Death Leap?"

"Yes, my Queen."

"Then you can carry out my plan?"

"Certainly, my Queen; but how about the illness of Señor Luka?"

"You must arrange that also, Señor Ramon," and Zulita smiled in her sweet way, and the executioner bowed low, while he said:

"Command me, my Queen, even to my life, if it will serve you by the taking," was the reply of the executioner.

CHAPTER XXV.

ON THE THRESHOLD OF DEATH.

WHEN Lieutenant Dunbar Kennon so hastily left Cloudlands, after his duel with Farmer Frank Fairfield, he certainly felt that he had given his adversary his death-wound.

He sailed in the little yacht of Cloudlands to the city of New York, and there took passage for Baltimore, where he knew a brig-of-war was to sail on a pirate-hunting expedition into the Southern waters and he could get orders to join her and not wait out his leave of some weeks longer.

In those days affairs of state were not run as much like machinery as now, and there was not the degree of "Red Tape" business before anything could be done, as now.

As to his duel with Fairfield, Dunbar Kennon did not dread that the Navy Department would interfere, for it was with a civilian, and not with an officer of the service.

Then, too, he had been the challenged party, and in those days dueling was winked at, if not allowed.

But, though having no personal fears, as far as the law went, Dunbar Kennon was anxious to return at once to sea service and he well off when a notice of the affair should go abroad.

His vessel sailed for Southern waters and rendered good service, the captain having several times sent home outlaw prizes, and in each case mentioned his lieutenant, Dunbar Kennon, for most gallant services rendered.

In the mean time a look at Cloudlands and its vicinity will interest the reader, for Frank Fairfield had not received a fatal wound as had been at first supposed by all.

He had been borne to River Vale Farm, at his own request, instead of to Cedar Hall his own home.

Whether it was because he felt that the grip of death was upon him, and he wished to make amends to pretty Di Douglass, is not known; but to River Vale he went, and the first one to greet him was the maiden who had made a threat against him only a short while before.

She saw that he was wounded, but conscious, and from her shut teeth came the words:

"This is an unlooked-for revenge."

But she had him borne into the little home, to

the very room where he had been before taken at the time she had rescued him from drowning in the river.

The doctor soon arrived, examined the wound and said the chances were against him.

"Save him, doctor," pleaded Di, while the tears were in her eyes.

"Devoted nursing alone can do it, my child," answered the man of surgery.

"I will be his nurse," responded Di, in a manner that told how much she would do to save him.

And so she constituted herself head nurse, with Monsieur Pierre Gerard and her brother Saul as assistants.

The duel created a furor in the neighborhood, but the cause of it no one seemed to know, and when Monsieur Gerard was questioned his reply was a shrug of the shoulders, while there was a look upon Captain Kennon's face which prevented any one questioning him upon the subject.

Thus the days went by, with Frank Fairfield hovering between life and death.

Again and again, as she watched by his side, Di Douglass felt that he was going to confess his wrong to her, and ask her to become his wife in earnest, ere he should die.

But he uttered no word of the kind and grimly watched the doctor, asking him at each visit:

"Is there hope?"

The reply in the affirmative brought forth invariably the lowly-spoken words:

"I will wait then until there is no hope."

And so he waited, while the heart of poor Di ached, and at last the doctor said the chances were in his favor.

Slowly the man's grip on life became stronger, and at last the doctor said:

"All you need now, Mr. Fairfield, is quiet and a continuance of the good nursing which you have had."

"But you have been on the very threshold of death, and you owe your life to the devoted care of this noble girl, for she, not my skill, has saved you."

The wounded man smiled grimly.

He would recover and he had not bound himself irrevocably to Di Douglass.

That he had deceived her by a mock marriage was not true, though he meant for her to believe so; as so believing it gave no hold on him, except one of honor, and if he could destroy all traces of that marriage he was yet free to win Valerie Rossmore, he felt.

That Dunbar Kennon had gone to sea he had been told, and perhaps not to return for a year or more, and in that time much could be accomplished he knew, and he meant that there should be.

Had he not met Valerie he might have been contented at least in the love of Di Douglass; but having met her he felt that she was the one woman in all the world for him to win.

He had nearly lost his life in his fight for Valerie Rossmore, but he would win her yet and thus avenge himself upon Dunbar Kennon.

Thus matters stood in his mind when at last he was well enough to return to Cedar Hall.

He could not leave River Vale, after owing his life to Di Douglass without some understanding with her, and so, to gain time in which he could destroy all traces of his secret marriage with her, he determined to come to a compromise, cost it what it might.

So he asked Di to come into the little parlor with him as he was waiting for the Cedar Hall carriage which was to bear him home, and said:

"Di, I owe you my life, and I hope that after all I have suffered you will believe what I say to you."

"I will try and believe you, Frank," she said, in a low tone, and he saw that her face was pale and haggard, and all from the long days and nights she had devoted to him.

"I told you, Di, that our marriage was a mock one; but I wished you to feel that you were bound to me and not love another, and then when I could claim you openly I would do so."

"It still stands that way; but there are reasons which now I cannot tell you why we should not now be married, and yet in good time it shall be so."

"I have a bold and dangerous game to play, Di, and I am aiming at a high mark, but you have my love, and in good time you shall become my wife in earnest."

"But you must trust me through all and not doubt me in anything, no matter what I seem to do that appears disloyal to you."

"I ask you, Di, for your full faith and trust for one year."

"Will you give it to me, Di?"

She loved him, and so yielded, pledging him the time he demanded.

And so Frank Fairfield returned to Cedar Hall, while Skipper Douglass, upon questioning his daughter as to how matters stood between her and the handsome and rich young farmer, received reply:

"We understand each other, father, and more I cannot say; but in good time all will be well."

"I only hope so, my child; but somehow I have hateful thoughts at times, and I almost wish that Lieutenant Kennon's sword had done better work on that man."

And the skipper's face clouded as though from a foreboding of evil.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

VALERIE ROSSMORE was most anxious as to the duel, when she knew that Dunbar Kennon and Frank Fairfield were to meet.

She had learned to love the lieutenant with all the power of her intense nature, and she was nearly crazed while his life was in danger.

She knew that the young farmer was an expert with both sword and pistol, and that he practiced daily with both, while Monsieur Gerard, a most skillful swordsman, had given out that his pupil was his superior in the use of arms.

She felt that she could not do other than as she had, for the farmer had been most insulting to her, and so she had brought Dunbar Kennon to face him.

That there was some secret between the two, occurring when they were midshipmen together, she was certain; but Dunbar Kennon had never breathed a word against his former brother officer, and the mystery remained unsolved.

Still it must have been something of deep import to keep Frank Fairfield from Cloudlands the moment he knew that its heir had returned.

When the duel was over, she was glad to have it end as it had, and more happy was she in the thought that Dunbar Kennon had at once gone to join the brig-of-war which was to sail in a few days, and on board of which a berth had been open to him only a day before.

The letter of Dunbar Kennon, telling her and his father where to address him, had in some way miscarried, and the first news he had received from home had been long months after his departure.

Then it gave him no tidings of whether Frank Fairfield was living or dead, and left him in dread suspense upon this matter, but urged him to come home to see his father, who was ill.

The start of the young officer and the faithful Paul, the treachery of the crew of the little craft in which they had set sail to head off the north-bound ship, after being wrecked upon the home of the Island Rovers, and what followed, has been made known, so that the happenings at Cloudlands and its vicinity must now be told.

When at last Frank Fairfield was reported out of danger, Valerie Rossmore gave a sigh of relief.

She was glad that he had not died by the hand of Dunbar Kennon, and yet she dreaded that as he had gotten well, the end was not yet.

"He will be more revengeful now than ever," she said, and she felt that he would again seek to meet her lover in a duel, in the mean time devoting his whole time to practicing with sword and pistol until he could make no failure.

There was also in the heart of Valerie Rossmore a strange regard for the young farmer which she could not account for, or get rid of.

He was a fascinating fellow, and somehow had won her liking in spite of herself.

But for Dunbar Kennon's coming, she would have loved him; but she well knew the love would have been but child's play in comparison with what she felt for her sailor lover.

Some months after the duel, Valerie began to notice that Captain Kennon was looking pale and haggard.

He ate little and drank more, and seemed to be constantly upon the go.

Then he did not sleep well at night, and began to take long naps in the daytime.

That he was failing she plainly saw, and so she wrote to Dunbar Kennon to come home, though she kept it a secret from his father that she had so written.

Often it was the wont of the young girl to accompany Captain Kennon in his rides and drives, and in fact he never had allowed her to go off of the estate alone since the duel.

But one afternoon as he was sleeping, when the hour came for his accustomed ride, she would not awaken him, and mounting her horse started off alone.

She rode, through a strange desire to see the spot, to the scene of the duel, and, having been told how to reach there by the captain, found no difficulty in finding the little vale where Frank Fairfield had so nearly lost his life.

As she rode over the hill a shot broke upon her ear, and she beheld there Frank Fairfield, pistol in hand, practicing at a target.

He saw her as she did him, and raised his hat, while he advanced toward her.

She had not seen him since the day of the duel, when he had visited her at Cloudlands.

She was half tempted to turn her horse and ride away, but thought better of it and rode on.

His horse was hitched not far off, and she saw that the farmer had come to the scene of the duel to practice, as though he hoped that very spot would again be chosen for a meeting with Dunbar Kennon and himself at some future day.

and, by being thoroughly accustomed to the locality, he could make no mistake.

He seemed cut at being found there, and his face at first flushed; but he put on a bold front and walked toward her, at the same time putting his long dueling pistols out of sight.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A REMARKABLE COMPACT.

As Farmer Frank Fairfield advanced toward Valerie Rossmore, he walked with a slow step which she did not fail to observe.

Then, as he drew nearer she was almost startled by the change in him.

He was fully thirty pounds less in weight, his face was very pale and haggard, and his eyes were sunken, but full of fire.

There was a look of stern resolve upon his face too, which hardened it, and he appeared to have suffered greatly in both body and mind.

"It is kind of you, Miss Rossmore, not to ignore my existence," he said, as she halted her horse near him, and, in seeming pity extended her hand, though the impulse that caused her to do so she could not understand.

"I feel sorry for your suffering, Mr. Fairfield, but congratulate you that you have recovered," she said.

"I thank you; but I am yet far from well, though recuperating rapidly now."

"I nearly lost my life, Miss Rossmore."

"Yes, it was very nearly a fatal wound."

"It was so meant to be; but then as I also meant to kill Lieutenant Kennon, I do not blame him, for all was fair between us."

"I am glad to hear you admit this, Mr. Fairfield."

"Have you heard from him of late, may I ask?"

"He is cruising in the Caribbean Sea and his vessel is doing good service."

"You do not expect him home soon then?"

"Oh no, not for a long time, unless his father's failing health forces him to come."

"I have heard that Captain Kennon was failing."

"Yes, he seems to be suffering, and yet I see no cause for it; but he is very gloomy at times, and I have written Lieutenant Kennon just how his father was."

"He will doubtless return then, even should he have to resign, for he has been a devoted son always."

"You speak kindly of a foe."

"I tell but the truth, Miss Rossmore, and though there has been trouble between Lieutenant Kennon and myself I cannot slander him without cause."

"But may I ask you one thing?"

"Yes, sir."

"It is if you and the lieutenant are engaged, as rumor has it that you are?"

"I believe I told you upon our last meeting that I broke with you because I learned through meeting Lieutenant Kennon that I had not loved you as I did love him."

"This is my answer, then?"

"Yes."

"You are pledged to him?"

"I am."

"And upon his return you will be married?"

"Yes, sir."

"And yet he loves you not half so well as I do."

"I love him, however, and believe what he has told me in regard to his loving me."

"Ah, Miss Rossmore, if I could but win your heart and hand I would be the happiest man on earth."

"I have heard that you were engaged to Miss Di Douglass, a most beautiful and estimable young lady."

"It is not true."

"She saved your life once, when your boat was capsized in the river and your comrade drowned?"

"She did, and won my everlasting regard by it."

"Then they say that you were taken by your own request to her home, when you were wounded here on this spot."

"I was."

Valerie smiled, and seeing it, Frank Fairfield said:

"Let me tell you that I respect Miss Douglass most highly, and regard her with feelings of deepest friendship."

"She is a lady, though poor, and, pardon my conceit, knowing that she loves me, when I was wounded here, by the man whom you love, and believing I was going to die, I asked to be carried to River Vale."

"Had the doctor given me no hope, I should have sent for a clergyman and made Miss Di Douglass my wife, thus leaving her my name and fortune."

"As I lived I did not do so, because I cared not to bind myself to her and yet love you."

"Is my explanation satisfactory, Miss Rossmore?"

"It is, and does you credit."

"Now, as you know the exact situation as regards my feelings toward you, may I ask, Miss Rossmore, if there is one atom of hope for me?"

"With me?"

"Yes."

"I just told you that I was pledged to my cousin, Lieutenant Kennon."

"True; but in case of his death?"

"We will not take that into consideration."

"Life is uncertain at all times, Miss Rossmore."

"True; but do you mean in case of his death at your hands?"

"I did not particularize; but said in case of his death."

"You mean for me to answer if there would be hope for you?"

"That is just what I do mean."

"I would never become an old maid, Mr. Fairfield; I have a horror of that, and, as I like you, I frankly confess, next to my cousin, I might marry you, in case of his death, but never if he fell by your hand, so if you love me you will never by such act separate yourself from me. Are you answered, Mr. Fairfield?"

"Completely; and I thank you, and I will prove my love for you by never again raising hand against Lieutenant Kennon, though I frankly confess that I came here to practice for the purpose of again meeting him upon this spot some day."

"Your confession has disarmed me, and I thank you."

"But may I not come to see you at Cloud-lands?"

"No; for no one could understand it after all that has occurred."

"Good-by, Mr. Fairfield, and if we meet in our rides I am willing to talk with you; but if in public, no."

She extended her hand and he grasped it, pressed his lips quickly upon the glove, and said:

"This is a compact between us, that in case Dunbar Kennon dies, *not by my hand*—"

"*Not by your hand!*"

"Then you become my wife."

"Yes."

So saying she rode away, leaving him standing as motionless as a statue gazing after her.

But there was a strange light in his eyes as the thoughts sped through his brain, and mounting his horse he rode home at a faster pace than he had dared attempt since he was wounded.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A BOLD GAME TO WIN.

AFTER her remark to the executioner, known to the Island Rovers only as Señor Morte in his disguise as the Man in Red, and otherwise as Señor Ramon, Zulita awaited his response.

The remark was full of significance to the executioner, as will be seen by his reply:

"The Señor Luka is now in perfect health, my Queen?"

"Yes."

"But he must be ill to-morrow night?"

"So I mean."

"The Spray sails upon her mission as courier-vessel to-day, my Queen?"

"She does, señor."

"Captain Harman commands her as usual?"

"Yes."

"But she will be delayed off the Beacon Rock until to-morrow night, as I understand it?"

"She will be at the Beacon Rock to-morrow night, Señor Ramon."

"And these two men, the white señor, the black slave are to be led forth by me to take the Death Leap at midnight to-morrow night?"

"Yes, señor."

"Instead they are to descend by a rope to the rocky path below?"

"Yes."

"That they will have to walk around until they come to a boat that is moored in a cove?"

"Yes."

"Will any one be in that boat, my Queen?"

"Yes, two persons."

"I need not know who they are?"

"Yes, for I will tell you."

"Not unless it be necessary, my Queen."

"I prefer to show my perfect trust in you."

"I thank you, my Queen."

"Again I ask you would you be willing to leave this island?"

"No, my Queen, I am here for life."

"Well, Señor Ramon, I will be one of those waiting in the boat, and the other will be Lazuli, my maid."

The man fairly trembled at these words.

He gazed at the young girl as though in a stupor, and then he gasped forth:

"You?"

"Yes, Señor Ramon."

"You, my Queen?"

"I so said."

"You will leave this island, and your people?"

"Yes, for I am not happy here now."

"I believe I can understand! and I can now say that I too would go when its sunshine goes from the isle."

"I offered you the privilege of so doing; but let me tell you, señor, all that I wished of you."

"I listen, my Queen, with heart and brain at your will."

"I wished you to see that Señor Captain Luka was too ill to-morrow night to leave his bed."

"I wished you to lead alone those two men out, as though to take the Death Leap, and then aid them to descend to the shelf-path, telling them where to find the boat."

"Then you were to return to Señor Luka, report that they had gone over the cliff into the sea, as in reality they will do, but not in irons and into the breakers."

"Then see that he recovers from his ailment under your treatment, leave him, and Queen Zulita and her maid, Lazuli, will be missing in the morning, while upon her door will be found nailed a sealed note, addressed to her people."

"This note will state that driven by remorse at allowing two innocent men whose lives she had saved, to be forced to take the Death Leap, she has, followed by her faithful Lazuli, cast herself into the sea, as I will do, for I seek safety on the sea instead of death."

"Now, my good Señor Ramon, this note will be addressed to the Three Wise Men, and it will beg that chief Mazula be made King of the Island Rovers, and thus Zulita will be considered dead to all, and you alone will know the truth."

"I will not betray you, my Queen, as I feel that you know."

"I do know it, my noble, faithful Ramon, and so I trust you with all that I intend to do."

"One question, my Queen."

"Yes, señor."

"May I ask if the Señor American knows of this?"

"No."

"Yet it is on his account you leave?"

"Yes."

"My Queen, may every joy attend you; but should you still need a friend, when you have gone far from here, find some way to communicate with Ramon, and I will come to you."

"I will, my faithful friend."

"And, my Queen, let me tell you not to go forth in the world unprepared."

"Gold is the God that mankind worships the world over, and you have a treasure at your disposal, so take gems sufficient to enrich you."

"I thank you, Ramon, and I will, for I had not thought of that; but neither Lazuli or myself will take aught to cause a suspicion that we have not thrown ourselves into the sea."

"I will aid the idea still more, my Queen, by placing part of your costume upon the rocks below, as though washed there by the waves."

"Ever faithful Ramon; but now you must leave me, and you are to give out that I am not well, but I wish the gayeties to still continue."

"You shall be obeyed, my Queen; but about your boat?"

"I will take one of the Spray's skiffs, which Señor Harman is himself to take and leave at the cove on the shore."

"All is well planned, my Queen; but I hope it is a stiff boat, for it is quite a little run to Bacon Rock, and should the sea be rough to-morrow night, I fear—"

"I will see that the life-boat of the Spray is left there, my ever faithful Ramon, and the American señor is a sailor of skill, you know."

"Yes, my Queen; but now I will leave you, yet see you again to-morrow to say farewell, when you will perhaps have communicated with the American señor."

"Yes, come to-morrow, and then, Ramon, you will know all, for *perhaps after all I may not go*."

"You may not go, my Queen?" asked the surprised man.

"Yes, Señor Ramon," was the reply, in a sad tone.

"I do not understand, my Queen?"

"Well, it depends upon a word whether I go, or not."

"If I go, all shall be as I have said."

"If not, my Queen?"

"The American señor and his slave must go, anyhow."

"As you have planned, my Queen?"

"Yes."

"I will see to it in any case, you may rest assured."

"I will trust you, Ramon, so now leave me."

He bent low before her, and departed from the room.

She at once arose and began to pace to and fro, with a strange expression upon her face.

"How strange that the thought just then suddenly flashed before me that after all *I would not go*."

"And yet it may be."

"I must know, and at once, for this suspense comes upon me with direst dread."

"I will write my letter at once."

Sitting down to her table, she seized a quill pen and ink-horn and began to write.

But what she wrote seemed not to suit her, for she tore it up and again began a letter.

This, too, shared the fate of the first, and it was not until a third attempt that she wrote that which seemed satisfactory to her critical self.

She read it over three times, folded it up carefully and sealed it.

Then she called to Lazuli, who soon after ap-

peared, for she had been away when her mistress first called.

"The boat is at the cove, my Queen, for I saw Señor Harmon take it there."

"Which boat took he?" quickly asked the young Queen.

"The life-boat of the Spray."

"It was thoughtful of him, for I meant to send word for him to take the life-boat there for us, as it may come on to blow to-morrow night, Lazuli."

"I hope not, my Queen."

"It would be safer for us—if we go, Lazuli."

"If we go, my Queen?"

"Yes, for we may not, but this letter will decide."

"Can you give it to the American señor in some way, Lazuli?"

"I can try, my Queen," was the answer, and Lazuli started forth upon her mission to in some way outwit Luka, the guardian of Dunbar Kennon and Paul.

CHAPTER XXIX.

LAZULI'S STRATEGY.

LUKA was in his pleasant quarters in the Fort.

The building was just a few steps from the stronghold, and from the Fort, neither of which could be seen from a vessel passing off-shore.

No guard was kept in the Fort, and no watch was held over the prisoners, for no surprise was possible to the Rovers, as far as an attack was concerned, and no traitors were supposed to be in camp.

Thus the Fort was left to take care of itself, with canvas blinds across the ports, painted so as to resemble rocks from the sea.

The stronghold, in which was the prison-room and several others, was back of the Fort, and it was also used as an arsenal.

On one side was the little cabin used as a kitchen and dining-room, and upon the other was a pleasant abode, the home of the commander of the Island guards, or defenders, and, after Chief or Commodore Mazula, the ranking officer, for the Wise Men were left to attend to the civil matters of government.

Seated in his quarters, the afternoon of the second day of the Queen's fête, Captain Luka was nursing his sorrows, in that his rival, Mazula, would not only win Zulita, but also become King of the Island Rovers.

It was a cause of deep sorrow to him, for he was in love with the Queen, and ambitious as well.

There was one consolation which he hugged to his heart, and that was that he would marry Lazuli as a solace.

He knew that her position as maid to the Queen made her rank as the first maiden among the Island Rovers' fair daughters, and he had long been taken with her beauty and winning ways.

"She loves me, or she would never have kissed me as she did yesterday," he said to himself.

But Captain Luka was not as versed in feminine nature as he deemed himself.

His thoughts were upon Lazuli as he sat there in his quarters, and suddenly she appeared before him.

At once he was upon his feet, a pleased smile chasing the look of gloom from his face.

"Ah, pretty Lazuli, this is a pleasure indeed," he said, earnestly.

"Captain Luka, I have come to tell you that I don't think I did right yesterday," she said, demurely.

"How could you do wrong, Señorita Lazuli?"

"Well, I coveted the strange ring which I saw upon the hand of that poor American señor, and went in, you remember, and asked him for it."

"Yes."

"Now I don't feel that I did right; for it seems to me like robbing a dying man."

"Don't look at it in that way, Señorita Lazuli, for if you did not get the ring it would be lost with him, for you know we cannot take aught from one condemned."

"True, but I would like to return it to him now and ask if he will, when you lead him to execution, give it to you for me, but to wear it until then."

"If he will do this, then will I satisfy my conscience."

"I will ask him about it, Lazuli," and the Island Rover arose.

"Cannot I save you the trouble, for I wish to let him know how badly I feel?"

"You know our orders in regard to condemned men, Lazuli?"

"Yes, and you don't know how badly I feel to think I went and begged him for it," and Lazuli began to weep, or at least made Luka think so.

Even though he was an Island Rover he was human and could not withstand a woman's tears, even though they were crocodile tears that were shed, so he said:

"As all the Islanders, old and young, big and little, seem to be enjoying themselves at the fête, I will risk letting you go in, Lazuli, if you will show that you care enough for me to give me another kiss?"

"You know that I do, Señor Captain, care for you very much."

"I wish that you cared more for me."

"I love our sweet Queen, better than all the world, señor, and I do believe if she should die I would die also."

"Why I am happy when she is happy, and sad when she is sorrowful."

"Do you know, Señor Luka, I love her so dearly that were she to say to me to come with her and spring from yonder cliff I would do so without a regret."

"I wish you would love me that same way, Lazuli."

"Who knows but what I may some day; but, señor, do you know I am worried about our Queen?"

"In what respect, Lazuli?"

"Well, if I tell you, you won't betray my confidence?"

"No, indeed, sweet Lazuli."

"You know that Chief Mazula has been selected by the Three Wise Men as her intended husband?"

"Yes, Lazuli, yes."

"Well, I think there is another that she loves, and she has been sad to feel that she was not the one selected."

"Yes, Lazuli, yes," eagerly said Luka.

"Now, her nature is one to love but once, as mine is, and to lose her lover is worse than death to her, and I would not be surprised if she did not live long."

"She has seemed happy, Lazuli."

"Ah, yes, but we women can feign what we do not feel, you know, señor."

And the artful little maid brushed a tear from her eyes.

"It distresses me, what you tell me about our Queen, Lazuli."

"It distresses me, too, señor; but do not speak of it, I pray you."

"I will not; but can you tell me, Lazuli, who this person is that the Queen has honored with her love?"

"I said I thought so, mind you, señor."

"Yes; but who is he?"

"I dare not tell you, but you ought to be able to guess."

"Ah! dare I say it is myself?"

"I thought you knew, or I would never have referred to it, for you seem to read a woman's thoughts."

Luka was beside himself with joy and at once imagined himself irresistible, as many another man has done under the play of a cunning woman.

"But now I must go, señor."

"And you will give me the kiss I asked if I let you run in an instant and see the condemned señor?"

"Yes, take it and give me the key."

She held up her mouth for the kiss, and held out her hand for the key at the same instant.

Luka was almost overwhelmed, but he had the presence of mind to give her the kiss, while she took the key from his hand and darted toward the stronghold.

"Señor, here is a letter for you."

"Read it carefully, and place your answer in the crevice of the wall there, and I will get it."

"Here are ink-horn, paper and quill-pen for you to write with."

"If reason is asked you for my coming, say that I was repentant and brought back your ring."

"Here it is."

She gave him the ring, along with pen, ink-horn and paper, and was gone, having most adroitly delivered the letter intrusted to her by the Queen of the Island Rovers.

CHAPTER XXX.

ZULITA'S LETTER

WHEN Lazuli had delivered to him the slip of paper on which was written, "Don't take the Death Oath," Dunbar Kennon felt sure that it came from the Queen of the Island Rovers and that she was going to make an effort to save him and Paul from being put to death.

He was assured that what she did would have to be done secretly, and he had hope that all would come well in the end and expressed this hope to Paul.

"She scared me, master, when she sided with that handsome but fierce-looking young chief, but I guess she did it for a reason to help us in the end," Paul replied.

"It must be so, Paul," was the response, and then Dunbar Kennon laughed lightly at the thought of telling him not to take the Death Oath, a thing which he would have died before he would be guilty of.

So time in the stronghold dragged wearily along, and the prisoners felt their utter powerlessness to do anything to aid themselves.

Luka gave them food, and he was all that they saw, until artful Lazuli came in with the letter, and handed back the ring to the sailor, and which she had used as excuse to get to see him.

This letter, with the accompanying pen, ink and paper, gave both Dunbar Kennon and Paul renewed hope, and the former proceeded to hastily break the seal.

The handwriting was bold and handsome, showing that the writer was educated at least, and the letter was well expressed throughout.

It bore simply the date of the day and year, and was as follows:

"Will it be possible for you to understand what I am going to write you?"

"I hope so, and I beg that you will not deem me bold and unwomanly, for I act from an impulse which is as thoroughly beyond my control as are the stars of heaven."

"For impulse it was which drove me to your rescue, and having saved your life, something seemed to cause me to cling to you in a deeper friendship than I ever felt for another being."

"I so wish to save you, as I believe you understood, but these are a strange people of mine, and our laws are as the laws of death."

"Though Queen of the Island Rovers, I cannot openly save you, and you have been condemned to death, to take the appalling Death Leap in irons."

"Our people date back several generations, for my grandfather, a sailor, founded the Island Rovers, and I was born here on this isle."

"We have had other homes since, for we roam from isle to isle, in many seas, but we have come back here to remain three years, and half of that time has gone by."

"You have seen me, and you know what I am."

"I hope that you believe me a true woman."

"I am destined to marry Mazula, who seems, strangely enough, to hate and fear you, if I remain here, for I agreed to the selection by the Wise Men of a husband for me."

"I now feel that to marry him would be wrong, for my heart is not his, nor my own, but has gone into your keeping, I shame to say, without your having asked for my love."

"Loving you, I have determined to save you."

"Loving you, I must go with you, for since I have met you I long to fly from this place."

"I have arranged all the plans for your escape, and I ask you to take me with you, to make me your wife, and I will be to you all that you could wish."

"I love you, and you are my only hope in life."

"I beg you, therefore, to write me a reply if you will take me with you, for with me only can you escape."

"If you refuse, then you and your slave perish in that fearful Death Leap to-morrow night."

"This is my fête time, and my people are making joyous over the anniversary of my eighteenth birthday."

"They little dream that their Queen, driven by love for a stranger, is plotting to desert them."

"Were it suspected, then would I be put to death by cruel torture, and Mazula would be made king."

"If I rob him of his wife, I leave to him the title of king, and there are many beautiful maidens among the Island Rovers for him to select a bride from."

"If I go, it will be supposed that I committed suicide, and my maid accompanies me."

"If you do not pledge yourself to take me with you and make me your wife, I will let you go, for I could not be cruel toward you; but your slave must remain as a sacrifice, and I will confess my love for you, and all that I did, taking the consequence of death as my punishment."

"I have unfolded to you my heart, señor."

"I love you, and I beg you to take me with you and let me become your wife."

"If I deceive you, then you can drive a dagger to my heart."

"I await your answer in the anguish of fearful suspense."

"Is it hope for me, or is it death?"

"ZULITA."

Such was the strange letter which Dunbar Kennon read over and over again, and at last he bent his head and rested his face in his manacled hands.

The iron of temptation was entering deep into his soul.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE TEMPTATION

PAUL had never before seen his master so moved.

He knew that the letter must have contained something of a most important nature to cause his master to feel as he appeared to do.

But the negro remained silent, waiting for Dunbar Kennon to speak.

At last the young sailor looked up and said:

"Paul, I have received a strange letter here."

"Yes, master."

"It is from the Queen."

"Yes, sir."

"She has engaged for us to escape, upon certain conditions."

"I hope you can agree to them, master."

"Paul, the truth is she will go with us, but she expects me to marry her."

"Oh, master!" and Paul showed how deeply amazed he was.

But Dunbar Kennon continued:

"She is a wonderful woman, very beautiful in face and form, and if she be not a true one then her whole looks belie her."

"She is a woman that one might be proud of as a wife, and she is anxious to fly from this pirate island, for I am convinced that it is nothing more."

"But then, though I feel strangely drawn toward her, I frankly admit to you, Paul, I cannot see my way clear to pledge myself to make her my wife."

"Yes, sir, for there's Missy Valerie at Cloudlands, master."

"Yes, and yet, if I refuse, I would lose my life, and you certainly would, for we are doomed."

"I could go, she says; but I would not go without you, nor would I hesitate to accept her terms when your life is at stake."

"Then, too, Paul, she says that she will confess her treachery toward her people and sacrifice herself if I refuse."

"It is a most appalling situation to be found in, Paul."

"Yes, sir; but don't take me into consideration, master," said the faithful negro.

"But I do, you noble fellow, and I shall decide, leaving it to Valerie to say if I did right or wrong."

"I wonder if I told her that I was pledged to another if it would make any difference."

Then came the terrible temptation strong upon him, for the beautiful girl, bold as she had been in confessing her love for him, already held powerful sway over his heart and brain.

He had wished over and over again, since she had gone to his rescue out upon the surf, that Valerie Rossmore was like her.

Now came a momentous moment when his life, the life of his faithful servant, Paul, and her fate hung on the answer that he must make.

Life was sweet to him, for he was young, handsome, rich and had much to live for.

He had won the name of a gallant officer and skillful seaman, and to be forced to walk to his own death over the cliff was certainly a fearful doom to contemplate.

If he yielded he saved life, and saved Paul, while the lovely Zulita would become his bride; but the darker side showed to him that Valerie would be the one to suffer, and that it would be a bitter blow to her.

Then it would be Valerie's sorrow against his life and Paul's, and perhaps Zulita's.

It was a fearful ordeal for him to pass through and Paul regarded him most attentively, hoping that he would decide for the present and let the future take care of itself.

"Paul, I accept the terms of Queen Zulita," he said after some moments of silence.

The expression of joy upon the negro's face repaid Dunbar Kennon for his decision; but then in his joy at escaping from under the shadow of death, Paul showed that he thought of one who must suffer, for he said:

"Poor Missy Valerie."

"Yes, Paul; but I feel that she will think that I decided wisely."

"In fact, I do not see now I have decided how I could have hesitated, with three lives against the sufferings of one person, Miss Rossmore."

"I will write Queen Zulita at once, and place the note in the crevice there where her pretty maid bade me."

So saying he took the quill pen and wrote as follows:

"DEAR SENORITA:—

"Your letter came to me in safety, and I assure you that it gave me food for thought."

"Let me tell you that I could not be indifferent to one who risked her life save mine, and in my deadly peril here and despair, your sweet image has been in my thoughts constantly."

"I have even wished, to show you that you will not be bound to one who is indifferent, that one to whom I was pledged, a fair, lovely maiden in my far-away home, was more like you."

"To see you is to admire and respect you, and to feel what you have done for me is to win my love, though another must suffer."

"Knowing as I do her noble nature, I feel that she would rather that I should yield, than that three of us should suffer."

"Known then, my Queen, if so I may call you, that I am in your hands to command, and may Heaven bless you."

"DUNBAR KENNON."

This letter was folded and placed in the crevice through which the ray of light streamed from without.

Tempted, he had yielded, and in his reply he had wished to make Zulita feel that she had not offered her love to one who was so wholly indifferent to her that he accepted her terms merely to save his life.

Soon after the letter was placed in the crevice it was withdrawn from without, and Dunbar Kennon felt that the die was cast, the past must be forgotten, and the future alone looked to.

"Well, Paul, how will it all end?" he said.

"I don't know, master; but I hope its end won't cause you to regret not taking the Death Leap," said Paul.

And his words seemed to fall ominously upon the ears of Dunbar Kennon.

CHAPTER XXXII.

SEÑOR MORTE AT WORK.

To the surprise and distress of Señor Luka, after eating his supper he was taken quite ill, in fact, so much so that he had to call for the executioner, Señor Morte, and have him visit him upon an important matter.

When the gong sounded, which was the signal for the executioner to put in an appearance at the Fort, soon after a man in red was seen passing along through the village of the Island Rovers.

His way led toward the Fort.

Night had come on and the weather was threatening; but the *fête* festivities were kept up by the people with a desire to get all there was of enjoyment.

The *fête* had really terminated at sunset, the three days being over; but there was to be a feast later, and this none of the Island Rovers cared to miss.

They all regretted that Zulita their Queen had been taken ill, for the doctor, Señor Ramon, had said that she seemed to be suffering from some great depression.

Instantly Mazula had sought the doctor and questioned him closely.

"What is the nature of this illness, Señor Ramon?" he asked.

"It seems like an attack of melancholy."

"Brought on by what?"

"She appears to wish the execution of those two men over."

"I thought as much; but why should she have a thought for their fate?" and an angry flush came upon the face of Mazula.

"She says that she saved their lives at the risk of her own and appears to feel that she saved them from a death from drowning, to have them die by torture."

"So it impresses her, señor."

"Well, in a few more hours they will have taken the Death Leap and then I hope she will get over this attack."

"She should not have delayed their doom until after the *fête*; but hark! there is the tocsin sounding for the executioner to go to the Fort, so I suppose Señor Luka is anxious to have all in readiness for the affair to come off just at midnight, and be done with it."

"But have you any idea, Señor Ramon, may I ask you in confidence, who this executioner is?"

"No, señor, he keeps his secret well; but I must go again to see how the Queen is," and Señor Ramon left Mazula, who little dreamed that he was the executioner, and some minutes after was passing through the village in his scarlet suit as the man of death.

The Island Rovers were naturally superstitious, and seeing the man in red passing, a silence fell upon them until he had gone by.

On he went, straight to the Fort, and there discovered Señor Luka apparently suffering great pain.

"Ah, señor, what is it, may I ask?"

"I am really ill, Señor Morte, and I would like to have you look up Señor Doctor Ramon and send him to me, for I cannot understand my attack."

"I was seated here for quite awhile this afternoon, talking with Señor Ramon, and we had supper together, and soon after he left I was taken ill."

"I will go for him at once, Señor Luka; but have you any orders for me, for the tocsin sounded my signal?"

"Yes," and Luka shuddered, for in spite of all of his dealings with the executioner he had not become accustomed to his presence.

It was this very thing which had caused the old King, the first chief of the Island Rovers, not to allow his people to know who the executioner was.

Gazing upon his form, clad in bright red, trimmed with black, his masked face and gloved hands, the fingers of which ended like claws, while his feet went off into a Mephistian point, Señor Luka seemed to feel ill at ease in his presence, so said quickly:

"Yes, I need you, for I will not be able to lead those two doomed men out to take the Death Leap to-night, unless Señor Ramon gets me over this attack very quickly, and you must do all alone, should I not be there?"

"I can do so, señor, and will."

"I will be here before midnight, and if you are ill, or sleeping, will not disturb you, so you had better give me the keys now."

"Here they are; but now, good Morte, pray look up Señor Ramon for me, as I am suffering."

The executioner took the keys and hastened away, to reappear within a short while as Doctor Ramon.

That Señor Luka, whose supper had been medicated by Ramon, was kept too ill to get up and lead Dunbar Kennon and Paul forth to execution, can well be understood by the reader, and he was given a sleeping-potion that the executioner meant should keep him asleep until morning.

And before midnight, when the Island Rovers were asleep, driven to their cabins by the storm which had broken upon the sea after nightfall, Señor Morte, the executioner, went to the stronghold to lead the prisoners forth, as though to take the Death Leap over the cliff.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AT LAST.

FROM some cause, known only to himself, the master of Cloudlands began to fail in health, soon after the departure of his son.

He did not seem to suffer from any particular disease, but, as Valerie had written Dunbar Kennon, he grew nervous, could not sleep at night, and wished to have an attendant with him at all times.

He would pass a great deal of his time sleeping in the library by day, but the slightest sound disturbed him, and by night he got so that he never retired to bed, but kept a bright light in the hall, his own rooms and the library.

Valerie seemed greatly distressed regarding him, but kept her anxiety to herself, being ever most cheerful in his presence, and proposing a dozen schemes daily to draw him away from himself.

Under pretense of being deeply interested in some new books, she read them aloud to him at night, often remaining up until one and two o'clock, until it began to tell upon her.

She would go on her rides by day, more often alone on horseback, and she was surprised how often it was that she met Frank Fairfield on such trips.

Now she would come upon him riding along the road.

Then he would be seated upon the banks of some small stream fishing, while again she would meet him, gun on shoulder, in some forest-path.

It would appear to be accident, these meetings, and yet one or the other or both were to blame for them, for somehow they seemed to understand just where to find each other.

As days went by at Cloudlands Captain Kennon grew more and more nervous, and the trouble he suffered under, whatever it was, began to tell upon him.

His hair whitened and his beard became iron-gray, while his face was haggard and upon it rested the impress of deep suffering which appeared to be mental.

But if he had a secret which gave him pain he locked it up in his own breast.

His affairs were most prosperous, for he told Valerie that investments which he made for her and for himself had quintupled in value and made him more than a millionaire, while she was a very rich young lady indeed.

Cloudlands was kept up in grander style than ever, and where more servants were added to the household, the stables were filled with the finest horses and carriages.

A new yacht, a pretty schooner had been built, and her skipper and crew of four men were kept constantly on board of her.

As his health failed Captain Kennon seemed to seek relief in society the more, and often were entertainments given at Cloudlands, with drives to some pretty picnic-grounds miles away, sails on the river and other enjoyments to break in upon the suffering of a man who evidently was already doomed, and yet strove to distance death in the race for life.

The neighbors accepted the hospitalities of Cloudlands and enjoyed them greatly, while all the young men were in love with Valerie, in spite of her being engaged to Dunbar Kennon, and all of the maidens were envious of her wondrous beauty, powers of fascination and riches.

Of course from all this gayety Frank Fairfield was shut out.

In fact he seemed to make a recluse of himself since his well-nigh fatal duel, going to see no one, and always alone roaming the forests, or sailing upon the river, for he had had a little yacht built for himself, and though he had never yet learned to swim seemed to take great pleasure in cruising about the waters adjacent to his home.

So matters stood at Cloudlands about the time that Dunbar Kennon received the letter from Valerie bidding him come home and see his father, whose health was failing.

And while the young sailor and Paul were meeting with strange adventures, in the endeavor to reach Cloudlands, the master of that superb home was gradually becoming weaker and weaker, and each day slept less and less and had been told by the doctors that they could do no good for him.

"We doctor your body, Captain Kennon; but the trouble is with your heart and brain and you alone know what that is, so as to remove the cause," the doctor had frankly said to him one day.

Captain Kennon started at this, his face became white as death, and he gasped forth:

"Who said that I had cause for brain and heart trouble?"

"Who dares say I have been guilty of an act to cause remorse to break me down?"

"No one says so, captain, other than what I feel is the case, and I assure you until you remove the cause of your present troubles, you will never grow better."

Captain Kennon made no reply and the doctor soon after departed.

Then he began to pace up and down the piazza, muttering to himself.

"Remorse the cause—heart trouble, brain worry—why he seems to have read my soul."

"No! no! mortal man cannot do that."

"Remorse the cause! Great God! that is what it is."

From that day Captain Kennon began to fail more rapidly.

But he kept up until the very last, and when forced to give in from lack of strength, he would not go to bed but took to an easy-chair in his library.

Through the day he slept as he could, with

Valerie with him, and at night two servants were at his side to amuse him as best they could.

"He cannot last much longer, Miss Rossmore," said the doctor one night.

"He must die within the week, so you had better ask him about his affairs, if all is arranged, for I shall tell him that the end is near."

"Oh! that Dunbar were only here!" cried Valerie, and, as she spoke a carriage rolled up to the door and she uttered a cry of joy as by the moonlight she recognized the tall form of Dunbar Kennon spring out of the vehicle and ascend the broad steps to the piazza.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE EXILED SWORD-MASTER DEPARTS FROM CEDAR HALL.

AFTER his first meeting with Valerie Rossmore, when he had recovered from the wound received in his duel with Dunbar Kennon, Farmer Frank Fairfield had entered into a strange compact with the fair young heiress at Cloudlands.

That compact was that, in case of the death of Dunbar Kennon, *not by his, Frank Fairfield's, hands*, she would marry him.

She had said that she meant not to be an old maid, and, though she loved Dunbar Kennon with all the intensity of her nature, and she was a woman of the strongest feelings, she yet, though mourning his loss, would marry another.

Among all of her numerous suitors, Frank Fairfield held the strongest claim upon her.

He was one who had held first place in her affections until the coming of Dunbar Kennon.

He had risked his life in the duel with Dunbar Kennon, and she felt that he was the more deserving of her regard.

Then, too, he was a very handsome man, formed like an Apollo, had an elegant home, and, it was said, was quite as rich as was Dunbar Kennon, or as the latter would be at the death of his father.

All these things considered, though Dunbar Kennon, to whom she was engaged, still lived, Valerie had entered into the strange compact to marry Frank Fairfield, should her sailor lover die, and he not be his slayer.

Though they had met quite often afterward, neither Frank Fairfield or Valerie Rossmore referred to this compact, but that neither had forgotten it is certain.

If any one knew of their seeming "chance meetings," they themselves did not know of it, and no gossip had yet gotten hold of the fact.

When the compact had been made, in deadly earnest at least on the part of the man, Farmer Fairfield, it will be recalled, had mounted his horse and ridden rapidly homeward.

His face, very pale since his wound and long suffering, was flushed from some reason, and upon his arrival home Monsieur Pierre Gerard greeted him with:

"Ah, monsieur, how much better you vas look!"

Since the duel Monsieur Gerard had dropped back into his former position of half-companion, half-servant.

He had either to do this or lose his place, and Monsieur Gerard liked Cedar Hall, its good living and his comfortable quarters.

"Pierre, I wish to talk with you," and the Frenchman saw that the master of Cedar Hall was excited.

"Yes, monsieur."

"Have you saved up any money the time you have been with me?"

"A leetle, monsieur," answered the surprised Frenchman.

"Say about how much."

"Six hundred dollars, Monsieur Fairfield."

Pierre Gerard, can you be bought?"

"Eh, monsieur?"

"If I needed a certain service done, say one that I would intrust to you, would you do it for money?"

"Monsieur, man lives to make money."

"I serve you for gold, and you work your estate for gold."

"Good! that means you will do what I wish for gold."

"What does monsieur wish?"

"I will not tell you until I know if you will undertake the work."

"The pay, monsieur?"

"You have six hundred dollars laid by?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"It is in the bank?"

"Yes, monsieur; in New York."

"You once had money, I believe?"

"I was a noble, monsieur, but poor, and in seeking to get riches I did that which exiled me from *la belle France*."

"I understand, and you then became sword-master in the French Army?"

"In Egypt and in Spain, monsieur, for I dared not go under my name in France."

"You speak Spanish well, I believe?"

"As a native, monsieur."

"Good! and with your long beard cut off close, leaving only a mustache, and your short, black hair allowed to grow long, you would pass well for a Mexican, would you not?"

"Yes, monsieur, or a Spaniard."

"What do you consider a handsome sum of money, Pierre, to do certain work?"

"The work, monsieur?"

"That I will not tell you until I know if you can be bought."

"Eh! then I am for sale, monsieur, to you."

"Good! for any work?"

And the Frenchman started at the significance of the farmer's manner and question.

"I am no assassin, Monsieur Fairfield, if that is what you mean."

"Nor am I one to buy an assassin, Monsieur Pierre Gerard."

"I beg your pardon, monsieur, but I thought I saw blood in your eye when you asked the question."

"Perhaps you did, but not blood taken by foul means."

"The truth is, Pierre, I wish you to go upon a journey for me."

"Yes, monsieur."

"You must shave off your beard, leave only your mustache, let your hair grow long, dress as a Spaniard and pretend to be one."

"I wish you to go on a particular voyage, for a particular purpose."

"It must be supposed here that you are discharged, as I need your services no longer."

"Well, monsieur?"

"I will pay all of your expenses, and give you enough to live liberally and like a gentleman, and I will place to your order, in the bank where you have your money deposited, the sum of ten thousand dollars."

"Besides the expenses of my trip, monsieur?"

"Yes."

"It is liberal, monsieur, and I accept your offer at once."

"Good!"

"And the work, monsieur?"

"You are to start at once, as soon as you can get ready, and your things you had better carry with you, for you are to give out that you have left my service, you know."

"Yes, monsieur."

"You are to change your name, and so I will address you when I write you, and so sign yourself in addressing me, while we will agree upon a cipher to write in."

"I have a cipher, monsieur."

"Then we will use it. And now for a name."

"The one I bore in Egypt and Spain is Spanish."

"What was it?"

"Don Leon Lafonte."

"That is a good name, so with it and the cipher we are fixed."

"Now to the work on hand, Don Leon Lafonte," and Frank Fairfield drew his chair close up to the Frenchman, and for a long time the two talked together in a low earnest tone.

That night Pierre Gerard the exiled sword-master, left Cedar Hall upon his secret service mission for Farmer Fairfield.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE MAN IN RED.

"SEÑOR AMERICANO, I am ready."

"Are you?"

They were the ominous words which fell upon the ears of Dunbar Kennon and Paul, as they sat in the darkness of their prison-room in the stronghold.

They had heard the sounds of gayety, wafted up from the village of the Island Rovers, die away, and the howling of the winds had reached their ears.

"It is coming on to storm, Paul."

"Yes, master, so we will not be able to escape to-night," was the anxious response.

"I do not know, Paul."

"We are in the hands of Queen Zulita, and she is one to do and dare much."

"I only thought, sir, of how savage the sea looks in a storm all around this island."

"True, our experience of it was far from pleasant."

"But hark! the wind increases and the sea begins to dash heavily against the cliff."

"Yes, sir, and the sounds of singing and music have stopped."

"The Islanders have been driven off to their cabins, I guess, by the storm."

And so the time passed, until the hours seemed like nights.

At last a step was heard in the large hallway of the cabin stronghold, and a key entered the lock of the door leading into the prisoners' room.

A lantern then flashed into their eyes and before them stood Señor Morte, the man in red, whom both Dunbar Kennon and Paul knew to be the executioner of the Island Rovers.

It was his words that fell upon their ears, and at them Paul gave a low moan, for hope seemed to fade away.

But Dunbar Kennon answered firmly:

"We are ready, Señor Executioner."

Had Queen Zulita merely tried him by her letter?

Had she been in earnest and failed in the effort to escape?

Were they to die?

Were they to take the fatal leap from the cliff, all in irons as they were?

Was this but a part of Queen Zulita's plot to save them?

Such were the thoughts that surged through the brain of Dunbar Kennon, as he placed himself by the side of the man in red.

Paul promptly stepped to the other side, and then the executioner put out his lantern when he had locked the door, and said simply:

"Come!"

They walked, the three abreast, out of the stronghold, the clanking chains worn by the prisoners keeping time with their steps, and they were led toward the cliff.

The wind howled mournfully through the pines, and the roar of the sea upon the distant reef surrounding the island, came to their ears.

Then came the dash of the waters against the cliff, where the sea swept in through the break in the reef.

A wild thought came into the brain of Dunbar Kennon to make a bold strike for liberty.

He saw only the executioner near, and his manacled hands, brought down upon the head of Señor Morte must end his life then and there.

So he made up his mind that he would strike a death-blow for freedom.

He saw Señor Luka nowhere, and wondered at this.

Toward the cliff they went, and there they halted.

Just as Dunbar Kennon was getting ready to strike the executioner down, the man in red said in a low tone:

"This is a bad night, señor, for a run out to sea, even in a life-boat, but the chances must be taken."

"Here, let me unlock your irons, for the chains must be dropped over the cliff into the sea."

"Good Lord!"

The words broke from the lips of Paul, and his head fairly swam, the revulsion of feelings that came over him, from despair to hope, was so sudden.

"You do not intend that we shall take the Death Leap then, señor?"

"No, and I would say, señor, that never before did I see a man face death with the calm courage that you have done, while your slave also is possessed of the same indomitable pluck."

"I thank you, señor; but had you not spoken as you did, I confess frankly, I meant to tell you in your tracks, and make a bold effort to escape."

"It were better to die in the attempt than to go in irons to death."

As Dunbar Kennon spoke, the man in red took off his irons, and then gazed at him, while he answered:

"You are right, señor, and mayhap your bold attempt would have met with success, for you are sailors, and there are few at the haven in our boats, had you gone that way."

"But there is a better plan for you to follow."

"Come, my man," and the executioner began to unlock the irons upon Paul's hands.

This done, the chains were taken up and cast over the cliff into the sea, falling with a dull thud that brought a shudder even to the brave sailor.

"Now come with me," and the man in red led the way along the cliff, through a fringe of pines, bending and sighing under the wind, to a spot some distance from the stronghold.

At the base of a pine he found a rope-ladder, and this he threw one end of over the cliff, the other being already made fast to the tree.

"Señor, go over the cliff and down this ladder, and you will find at the further end of a path, which you take to the left, a small cove."

"In that cove is a boat, and upon the shore you will find two persons awaiting you."

"Should they not be there, await their coming, and then you have to face the sea out through the break in the reef."

"Oars are in the boat, and you and your man can use them, while one of the two you meet at the cove will be your pilot."

"Once out through the reef and you can raise a short mast and send sail, and your pilot will know whither to head."

"Now, señor, good-by, and success attend you, while, as you are good to the one who goes with you, may Heaven be good to you."

"If you are otherwise than true and noble to that one, then may Heaven's blackest curses fall upon you."

"Go, señor, you and your slave!"

He uttered the last words in a commanding tone, and with a word of earnest thanks to him Dunbar Kennon went over the cliff upon the rope ladder, and Paul quickly followed him.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

IN THE TEETH OF A GALE.

As soon as Dunbar Kennon went over the cliff, upon the rope ladder, he began to descend with the bold and confident air of a seaman, who felt safe as long as he held a rope in his grasp.

Some forty odd feet he descended and then his foot touched the ground.

It was very dark, but he could see that he was upon a narrow shelf of the rock, and it overhung the sea some sixty feet below him.

He steadied the ladder as Paul was coming down, and when he had reached his side, said:

"Well, Paul, this is better than going over the other cliff at a leap."

"Yes, master; but he is pulling up the ladder."

The rope ladder was drawn up, and a voice from above was heard saying:

"Take the shelf to the left, and you will soon reach the cove."

"Ay, ay, señor, thank you, and good-by," responded Dunbar Kennon, and he led the way along the narrow shelf under the cliff.

It sloped downward as they went along, and the spray from the sea flew in their faces.

After a walk of several hundred yards they came to a rocky arm that went off from the island, thus forming a small cove, not half an acre in size.

There was a steep path here, leading up the bank into the island, and another that led down to the cove.

The latter Dunbar Kennon took, and reaching the shore in the darkness he beheld a form before him, while against a rock was held a large skiff, in which sat another person steadying it with a boat-hook, for even in the little cove the water was rough.

"Señor Americano, I am Lazuli, and my Queen awaits you in the life-boat."

"Will you and your slave take the oars, while my Queen takes the helm?"

This was all that Lazuli said, and Dunbar Kennon raised his hat as he bowed and stepped into the boat.

Not a word was said by either himself or Zulita, and aiding Lazuli into a place astern, the young sailor bade Paul follow and take the bow oars.

Their hands were cramped from having been in irons; but life was the goal they strove for, and they at once bent to the oars with a will which sent the life-boat flying out of the cove.

Zulita was at the helm, and Dunbar Kennon felt no fear of her as a pilot, for he had seen all that she could do in her coming to the rescue of himself and Paul the day they were wrecked upon the reef surrounding the island.

Lazuli crouched at the feet of her mistress and was silent, and Paul, at the bow oars pulled a strong stroke in keeping with his master.

Around the point of the rocky arm went the life-boat, and it began to leap upon the rough waters.

The boat was deep, with a loaded keel and high sides, while it was long and narrow.

The stern and bow rose high and were sharp, and forward it was covered over for a fourth of its length with a high combing to keep out the waves that broke over the bows.

Along each side was a six-inch combing also, and into this were cut the rowlocks, so that a better boat for sea-work could not have been gotten.

There were two masts and bowsprits, and two sets of sails along the sides of the boat, the smaller one being for use in just such a blow and sea as they then had.

A glance revealed this to both Dunbar Kennon and Paul, and their spirits rose as they felt that they had a safe boat for the wild work ahead of them.

Around the island they went, and close in-shore, until they reached the rougher waters that swept in through the break in the reef and were hurled back by dashing against the cliff, over which the Death Leap was to have been taken by the prisoners of the Island Rovers.

The life-boat met the surging waters well, sending the spray in showers from her sharp bows as she was headed for the break in the reef by her daring pilot.

"There stands some one on the cliff, señorita," said Dunbar Kennon as his keen eyes detected a form upon the Death Cliff.

It was the first word that had been spoken by any one since Lazuli had met them, and Zulita started and turned half-around, as she gazed above her.

"It is the Señor Morte watching our departure."

"Heaven bless that man," was her reply, and she waved her hand toward him, though in the darkness it could not be seen.

"Suppose it were not the Man in Red?" my Queen?" said Lazuli, in a low tone.

"Our boat is white, and in this spray and darkness, unless we were being looked for we could not be seen."

"But if we were, my Queen?"

"Then a vessel would be manned and sent in chase, if any one dared attempt to run out in the teeth of this gale."

"Once through the reef and we could escape, I think, in this darkness, especially with the start we have."

She spoke with the utmost coolness, and Dunbar Kennon felt that the helm of the life-boat was in safe hands.

Soon after the form on the cliff was no longer visible, and in ten minutes more the strong arms of the oarsmen had sent the life-boat into the channelway through the reef.

Here the waves fairly seethed though and for awhile it seemed as though human strength could not force the life-boat out into the open sea.

But at last, inch by inch, she gained headway, and at last bounded high in air upon the mighty waves of the open sea.

Astern was the island, with the waters dashing upon the rugged reef that guarded it, and ahead was the open sea with its huge billows.

Here the life-boat rode more lightly, no longer being in the choppy seas, and Zulita said:

"Señor, it would be well, think you not, to step the little mast and set the small sail and jib?"

"Yes, señorita, if you intend to hold on as you now are headed we can make better time under sail, small as it is," was the answer.

And while Paul held the boat steady with his oars Dunbar Kennon stepped the little mast, hardly taller than his head, and ran the bowsprit out a couple of feet beyond the bows.

The sail and jib thus presented but a few square feet of canvas; but it was sufficient to send the life-boat flying along over the waters, while its four occupants kept to windward, the Queen of the Island Rovers still at the helm and seeming to steer by instinct, for she had no compass to guide her on her course in the brave fight for life they were making, for death threatened them on all sides in that fierce sea, while astern upon the island, should they be captured and taken back, their doom was certain, and all four well knew that it was so.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

LYING IN WAIT AT SEA.

THE Beacon Rock was almost out of sight of the retreat of the Island Rovers, even in the daylight, though it could be seen from the cliffs with the naked eye.

It had been so named from the fact that one man had been kept upon the little rock island, for it was nothing more, and at night his duties had been to light three beacons, some distance apart.

Two of these were at the further side of the little island, and fifty yards apart, while the third, a red light, was on the point nearest toward the isle of the Rovers.

A vessel heading in toward the Island Rovers' retreat, had to get the red light dead over her stern, and keep it at equal distance between the other two lights.

By doing this she could run directly through the break in the reef, and once inside, her pilot knew how to run her around to the lagoon.

But these lights had been done away with, on the Beacon Rock, when the skippers of the various little vessels of the Island Rovers' fleet learned how to run in and out of the channel through the reef in the darkest night, by taking objects on the shore, for no light was allowed to be displayed on their retreat, by the Rovers, who were anxious that the isle should be considered by all passing vessels inaccessible and hence uninhabited.

On one side of the Beacon Rock there was a little harbor, secure only when the wind was from a certain direction; but on the night of the flight of the life-boat it would have been madness for a skipper to attempt to anchor a craft there.

Out from the Beacon Rock, and trying to hug its lee as best it could, a little craft was lying to.

She rode the waves buoyantly, and was proving herself a perfect sea-boat.

Aloft on each mast was a seaman, evidently on the lookout for some object, for each one had a night-glass in his hand.

The night was very dark, storm-clouds swept low over the sea, and the wind howled through the rigging of the little vessel, as though angry at it for not going down under its force.

The wave also leaped viciously about it, striking many a hard blow, as though furious at its daring to brave their strength.

Upon the deck of the storm-tossed vessel three men were visible, one of these standing by the helm, and the other two ready to spring to their posts at the slightest indication that their services were needed.

"Nothing in sight aloft there?" suddenly called out the man standing by the helm.

"No, señor, nothing that I can see," said one of the lookouts.

"I see nothing yet, señor," said the other.

"It is but two hours to daylight, and I hope they will soon come, for we must be out of sight from curious eyes on the island when dawn breaks," said the skipper of the craft, for it was Harman, the young master of the Spray, and the lover of pretty Lazuli.

At length he said, addressing one of his men, who came toward him:

"This is a fearful night, and perhaps the Queen has not dared venture out, even in the life-boat."

"She would dare anything, señor, especially when she has set her heart upon doing so," was the answer.

"Yes, I believe you are right; but then, it takes a brave heart indeed to venture out in such a storm."

"True, señor, but as I understand it, the

American señor was to come, and he is a sailor."

"Yes, a naval officer and a plucky one, and his slave also has courage, from what I heard Chief Mazula say about their going so fearlessly to take the Death Leap."

"Ho aloft!"

"Ay, ay, señor."

"Nothing yet?"

"No, señor."

"Can the life-boat have been swamped, I wonder?"

"Hardly, señor, for you know it has saved us in many a blow almost as bad as this one."

"Yes, and properly handled it should be all right; but then, there must be a fearful chop sea to pass through in the reef channel, with this blow, and the waters driving dead upon the island," and the manner of the young Rover showed that he was anxious about the life-boat, for it held one who was dearer to him than all the world, the pretty Lazuli, whom he hoped soon to make his bride.

Outside of this, he was anxious to serve his Queen, and also to be the means of rescuing from their fate Dunbar Kennon and his negro companion.

He had, with his four companions, taken the Death Oath, when they fell into the hands of the Island Rovers, and thus saved their lives.

They had been watched for awhile by the Rovers proper, but at last were believed to be wholly content with their new existence, and no suspicion rested upon them.

But Harman had looked upon it that he, and the others, had taken the Death Oath to save their lives, and as it was thus forced upon them that it would not be registered in heaven against them, if they broke it.

For years he had sought a chance to make his escape.

But he had wished to make no mistake, and had, one by one gotten into his crew men, who like himself, were not "Rovers to the Island born," so to speak.

His vessel, on account of her great speed, had been made the "courier craft" of the Rovers, being sent from time to time to the little cruisers with orders for their captains, and there were various rendezvous where they could be found upon certain occasions.

When at last a chance appeared to escape, Harman found himself desperately in love with Lazuli, and this retarded his attempt until he felt sure that he could win the maiden's consent to fly with him.

To his delight and surprise, she had been the one to bring up the proposition, and gladly had he obeyed the orders brought him by the Queen.

He had fitted up his little craft to receive the Queen and Lazuli, and had taken the life-boat to the cove for them.

Then he had sailed, and keeping out of sight of the island by day, had approached the Beacon Rock after nightfall and lay to awaiting the coming of the life-boat.

He dared not attempt to run nearer the island, for fear of missing them, and besides, under the lee of the Beacon Rock, such a lee as it was, he knew was the best place to have the boat come alongside.

So it was that the Spray lay to, awaiting the coming of the fugitives, and it was no wonder that all on board had anxious hearts, when they knew how much was at stake that night of storm.

Thus the time passed by, Harman growing more and more nervous, as the dawn grew nearer and nearer, until a cry of joy burst from his lips as the man at the mizzen-mast suddenly called out:

"Life-boat ho, señor!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A SAIL IN SIGHT.

WHEN the cry of the lookout at the mast-head of the little Spray, of the Island Rovers' fleet, told the young Skipper Harman that a boat was in sight, his heart gave a great bound of joy, and he at once called the men from aloft to stand by and aid in getting those in the life-boat on board.

In a short while the boat was visible from the deck of the Spray, and they saw that it was not under sail but urged on by oars.

"That has been a tremendous pull," said Harman to his men, and soon after he hailed:

"Ho, the life-boat ahoy!"

In a moment came the reply in a voice that was clear and ringing:

"Ahoj, the Spray!"

"That voice has a quarter-deck sound to it," said Harman, and he called back:

"We are lying to."

"Come up under the stern and we will lower you a rope."

"Ay, ay, sir," and soon after the life-boat was near enough for Harman to cast a line.

Paul caught it skillfully, and the boat was drawn alongside.

Aiding Zulita and Lazuli on board, Dunbar Kennon bade Paul follow, and then he was last to gain the deck of the Spray.

With considerable difficulty the life-boat was

then hauled up to the stern davits, and the little vessel was allowed to swing off under jib and mainsail reefed down.

Away she sped over the rough waters, diving through the waves like a porpoise and driving along at a terrific speed.

"Can I aid you, sir?"

"If so, command me, and also my man here," said Dunbar Kennon stepping up to Harman, who held the tiller.

"No, thank you, sir, for my crew and myself can readily manage the craft and know her well, while you must be tired after your terribly long and hard pull, so had better turn in, as there is ample room in the cabin."

"No, thank you, I will leave the cabin for the Señorita Zulita and her maid, while Paul and I hunt quarters forward."

"You will not find them, sir, for we Island Rovers make no distinction on board our vessels, all of us occupying the cabin together, though the word of the captain is supreme."

"But there is ample room in the cabin for all."

"I prefer to remain on deck, for it is an ugly night," said Dunbar Kennon, not caring to enter the cabin whither Zulita and Lazuli had at once gone upon reaching the deck of the vessel.

"You got away without difficulty, I suppose, sir?" said Harman, willing to have the young officer remain with him.

"Yes, and your Queen deserves much credit for her splendid pluck and skill, for she ran us out through that reef channel, and then bade me set sail."

"But we could not carry it, so had to take it in after a run of a few miles, and again take to the oars."

"How she found you, without a compass, was marvelous."

"She was well taught, sir, and knowing where the island lay astern, the direction of the wind and rush of the sea, she made her calculations for the few miles she had to run."

"But I was getting very anxious about you, sir."

"Say rather about the fair Señorita Lazuli," said Dunbar Kennon, with a smile, for from what he had heard Zulita and her maid say on the run out to the Spray, he had discovered the secret reason of Skipper Harman's service in his behalf.

"Yes, sir, I must admit it; but I wished you to escape, too, for, as an American officer, I was assured that you would not take the Death Oath."

"No, I could not have done that."

"Was it not strange, sir, that the Queen was willing to leave her people?"

"I supposed she was perfectly happy among them, knowing little of any other life."

"Yet it seems she was not so, by her leaving," was Dunbar Kennon's reply, in an evasive manner.

After a moment he asked:

"Whither are you bound now, Captain Harman, may I ask?"

"I am simply scudding before the storm, sir, anxious to get as great a distance between the Rovers' Island and the Spray as possible when the dawn breaks."

"It is breaking now."

"Yes, sir, but we will be out of sight of the Rovers, unless they discovered your escape and have sent vessels in pursuit."

"If they recaptured us would they harm their Queen?"

"She would be forced to die, sir, by her own hand."

"I do not think they know of our escape."

"I hope not, sir; but if they did, you may be sure that every vessel which can float in this sea has been started in pursuit, for they would not rest with sending out one or two craft in chase."

"And when you stop scudding which way?"

"That is for the Queen to say, sir, or yourself," was the reply.

The dawn was now breaking, and as it grew lighter the wind began to die away while the sea, no longer driven by its force ran less high.

At last the sun arose and the horizon was swept with glasses upon all sides.

But nowhere was visible the island, nor was there a sail in sight.

"We have escaped them, Señor Harman," said Dunbar Kennon, as he put his glass down.

"Yes, sir, not a pursuer is in sight anywhere," and Harman called to his crew to put more sail on the vessel just as Zulita came on deck accompanied by Lazuli.

Her beautiful face flushed as she caught the eyes of Dunbar Kennon, and he bent low before her, while he said:

"We are safe, Señorita Zulita."

"Yes, señor, it would seem so, though knowing my people as I do, I will only feel so when we are off of the sea and safe in some port."

"But I came to ask you, señor, to say to what port you would go?"

"Is it a matter of perfect indifference to you, señorita?"

"Yes, señor."

"Then suppose you ask your captain to head for an American seaport?"

"You have but to name the port, señor?"

"New York then, I would say."

"Captain Harman, you have heard what the señor says, so please lay your course for New York."

"Yes, my Queen."

"No, Señor Harman, do not so address me, for I am no longer Queen, but plain Señorita Zulita."

Ere reply could be made, the quick eye of Dunbar Kennon fell upon an object far out upon the waters and he called out:

"Sail, ho!"

Instantly Harman turned his glass upon the sail and said quietly:

"My Queen, it is one of your cruisers."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE CRUISER.

ZULITA possessed a nerve of iron, beautiful as was her face and fragile her form, and the words of Harman did not cause her to start in alarm, but instead she took a glass and turned it upon the sail.

The wind was still fresh, and the sea yet rough, but the Spray was making good time.

After a long look through the glass at the cruiser Zulita said quietly:

"It is one of the Island Rovers' cruisers; I think the Red Rover."

"Yes, my Queen—"

"Not Queen, Señor Harman," said Zulita, with a smile.

"Pardon, señorita; but I was about to say that it is the Red Rover, for I recognize her now, and it is strange that we did not see her before."

"The spray prevented, and she was doubtless lying-to under bare poles," said Dunbar Kennon.

"Yes, that is it; but what is to be done, for we can outfoot her?"

"Run for it, then, Señor Harman."

The young skipper was about to give an order to set more sail and head away from the cruiser, when Dunbar Kennon said quickly:

"Pardon, señorita; but as I understand the situation you are not supposed to have run away from the island, but instead have left it to be considered that you and Señorita Lazuli sprung from the cliff."

"Yes, señor."

"Then as the cruiser has seen this vessel, and doubtless saw the Spray before we discovered her, our running away would be looked upon as suspicious and so reported when yonder vessel returns to the island."

"You are right, señor."

"The non-return of this vessel also you wish to have thought is owing to her being lost at sea, and not from having run away, and it is better to at once put a bold face on the matter, have us go below and Captain Harman stand for the cruiser and deliver what orders he may have for her commander, while at the same time he gives out that his vessel was badly strained in the storm and is leaking, so that he has to run to port."

"Then when she does not return it will be remembered that Captain Harman reported her leaking badly, and it will be thought that she foundered with all on board."

"Señor, you say wisely and well, and I thank you."

"Señor Harman, we will go below while you head for the cruiser," said Zulita.

And the four fugitives at once sought refuge in the cabin of the Spray.

Harman then put his vessel away to meet the cruiser as though he had just discovered her, and within half an hour's time they were within hail.

"Ho, the Red Rover!" called out Harman.

"Ay, ay, Señor Harman! when did you leave the island?"

"Two days ago, señor, and during our Queen's fête, much to my regret, as you may suppose."

"I don't doubt it; but what news?"

"You are to report at the Isle of Pines rendezvous about the last of the month, and all vessels are to come to the island for further orders."

"Ay, ay, señor; but have you any ammunition for use, for I am short?"

"No, señor, as what I have is destroyed, owing to my vessel being strained in the storm last night and leaking badly."

"I am sorry; but it was a fearful blow and I was forced to lie to through it all, and only got under way when I sighted you."

"Do you need any help?"

"No, thank you, señor, for I shall put for port at once, and you see that I am keeping my pumps going," and Harman pointed to two of his men who were working the pumps hard, for his thoughtfulness had caused him to send them there.

After a short while longer spent in conversation, and regrets expressed by the captain of the Red Rover at the powder being wet, and the Spray being sprung a-leak, the two vessels, which had been sailing side by side during the talking of their skippers, parted company. Harman heading as though to return to the island.

With a deep sigh of relief he saw the cruiser stand on her way, and from a stern port Dunbar Kennon had a good view of the vessel.

She was of some ninety tons burden, with high bows and stern, and was long, narrow and lean amidships which indicated great speed, as did all the vessels of the Island Rovers' fleet.

She carried three guns, all mounted upon pivots, one fore and aft and the third amidships, giving her a broadside of three heavy pieces, and a bow and stern chaser, in case she wished to catch a prize or run from a foe.

There were visible upon her decks about thirty men, and they wore a picturesque uniform, while at the peak floated the flag of the Island Rovers, a blue field, in the center of which was a golden eye, and a pair of snowy wings, spread.

"Is the craft a real pirate? and if not, what is she?" muttered Dunbar Kennon, recalling the fact that her commander had asked for ammunition.

When at last the two vessels were too far apart for their hulls to be seen by those on their decks, Zulita, who with Lazuli had gone into one of the two state-rooms in the cosy little cabin of the Spray, came out and said:

"Let us go upon deck, for I have something to say to all."

With a bow Dunbar Kennon followed her, wondering what it was that she had to say, and Paul brought up the rear, his curiosity also excited.

CHAPTER XL.

THE TRAITOR SEAMAN.

"SEÑOR HARMAN, please put the vessel now on her course for New York," said the fugitive Queen when she again ascended to the deck.

Her face indicated that she had something important to say, and Dunbar Kennon feared that she was going to speak of the compact between them.

She had, without seeming to avoid him, still appeared as though no letters had passed between them such as both he and she had written.

When the Spray was again put on the course on which she was heading when the Red Rover was sighted, Zulita said:

"Señor Harman, I would like to have you call your men aft, for I have something to say which I wish all to hear."

Harman at once obeyed, and while he still held the tiller his four men came and stood near him, while Dunbar Kennon took up a position near the starboard bulwark and Paul crouched near him on the deck.

Zulita and Lazuli were standing aft, the former with one hand resting upon the taffrail.

The Spray was skimming along under full sail under the six-knot breeze that was blowing and the sea had run down until it was no longer rough.

"Señors, I would say to you that I have forever left the Island Rovers, and go forth into the world to lead a different life than that of queen of a lawless band."

"My eyes have been opened to the fact that there are other scenes where one may be happy in life, and hence I have given up the people I have known as my own and go among those who are strangers to me."

"But I would that you should know that not for any sum in gold would I betray the Island Rovers, and I wish that all those present, who, in leaving with me, break their Death Oath of allegiance to our people, will take a solemn vow never to prove treacherous to them, never to mention their existence or where you have so long been while absent from your homes and kindred."

"You, señor, though not one of us and bound by no oath, as is also your slave, I hope will be willing to take the pledge I ask never to betray us, for, as an officer of the American Navy, I feel that you could destroy the League of the Island Rovers."

"Are you willing to do this, señor?"

"I am, señorita," answered Dunbar Kennon.

"And you will take such a vow?"

"Yes, for I owe it to you, after your saving my life."

"And your slave?"

"Will do as I do, will you not, Paul?"

"Yes, master."

"I thank you, señor, and you, Paul."

Then turning to the skipper, she continued:

"You, Señor Harman, I feel will do the same, for I know that you would not betray those whom you have so long dwelt among in friendship."

"You are right, señorita, I would not."

"And your men?"

The handsome young skipper hesitated, and his eyes fell upon one of the crew, a dark-faced man with an insincere look in his eyes.

Then he said:

"Señorita, let them speak for themselves."

"Well, my men, will you take the oath I ask of you? for rather would I have this vessel go to the depths of the sea now, with all on board, than to feel that one of my my people, after making his escape, would betray the Island Rovers to the cruisers of some powerful nation."

"Will you answer, men?"

Three of the four seamen at once replied:

"I will take the vow, señorita."

"Trust me, my Queen."

"I would never betray the Rovers, lady."

The fourth did not speak.

It was the man upon whom Harman had glanced with such strange significance.

"And you, señor?" asked Zulita, addressing the evil-faced individual.

"What is the vow?" he asked, sullenly.

"That you vow, as in the Death Oath, upon bended knees, with right hand upon your heart, the left raised toward heaven, never by act or word, or in any other manner, to betray the Island Rovers, their retreat, or what they do, and you are to swear this by all you hold sacred, with the prayer that Heaven may palsy your tongue if you do, and bring upon you and all you hold dear the direst ills that can befall mankind."

"Such is the oath I ask you to take, you who have been Island Rovers, for I shall not ask it of the Señor American, trusting to his honor not to betray my people."

"I could make a snug fortune by piloting a couple of cruisers into the Island Rovers' Retreat, so I will not bind myself by any such oath," said the man.

"Would you do this, señor?" and Zulita spoke calmly, though her face paled.

"Yes, for it was for this reason I was anxious to get away, and make big money by betraying the nest of pirates," was the unblushing response.

"Señor Harman, what do you think of this man's words?" and Zulita turned to the young skipper, who responded:

"Señorita, I fear that he speaks the truth, for my three other men have told me that he has asked them to join him in the plot to betray the Rovers."

"And I will," was the bold reply.

Dunbar Kennon and the others all glanced at the Queen, and awaited to see what she would say.

She bit her lips, as though to repress her emotion, and then said in the same calm tone in which she had before spoken:

"Señors, my people shall not suffer through the act of one man."

"I will still prove myself Queen here, for this vessel carries the flag of the Island Rovers, and your life, señor, shall be the forfeit of your rash words."

The treacherous seaman felt that he had gone too far.

He had believed that once free from the island he could do as he pleased, and he had laid all of his plans accordingly.

That Zulita would dare punish him he had not for an instant taken into consideration, and he was superstitious enough not to bind himself by so fearful an oath and then break it.

But at the words of Zulita he changed color, though he still believed that she would not dare carry out what her words had threatened.

"You are no longer Queen, for you are, as are the rest of us, a fugitive, and have no power now," he said.

"I will show you that I am still Queen, señor."

"Señor Harman, put that man in irons and rig a plank for him to walk over into the sea!"

The man shuddered at this stern command of the beautiful woman, and turning quickly to Dunbar Kennon, appealed to him.

"Oh, Señor Americano! I appeal to you as an officer of the United States, not to let this woman murder me!" he cried, now thoroughly frightened.

"I have no power, my man, on this vessel, and am here as a fugitive, the guest of Señorita Zulita and Captain Harman," was the cold response.

"But will you see me murdered?"

"You were offered terms and refused them."

"I will take the oath! oh, señor, tell her I will take the oath!" and the man dropped upon his knees before the beautiful girl, whose face was now stern, and cold as marble.

"Would you trust him, señor?" and she turned to Dunbar Kennon.

All awaited his words, Harman hesitating in his work to hear what the reply would be.

It came, stern and tersely spoken:

"I would not, for he would betray you the moment that he could do so with safety to himself."

"Your doom is settled, señor, and Heaven have mercy upon you."

"Señor Harman, obey my orders!"

So saying the young girl, still a Queen as she had proven herself, turned and entered the cabin, followed by her faithful Lazuli.

CHAPTER XL.

SAFE IN PORT.

THE absence of Zulita from the deck, caused Dunbar Kennon to feel better, for if the traitor seaman was to be executed, he was glad that the young Queen had not remained to witness her order carried out.

That he would certainly betray the Island Rovers, as he had threatened, there seemed no doubt, either in the minds of Dunbar Kennon or the others, and it was with little mercy for

him that Harman arranged for his summary death.

An "armor of chains," such as were put on those who were doomed to take the Death Leap, was brought out from the hold and placed upon the now cringing, frightened man.

The iron collar was snapped about his neck, and his wrists and hands were encircled by heavy manacles, while massive chains hung from them.

The man prayed, begged and swore in a breath, and his abject fear brought contempt rather than pity into the hearts of his comrades.

He had dreamed of winning a fortune by the betrayal of the Island Rovers, when he should pilot a fleet of war-vessels against them, and, to see his hopes of riches dashed down and death staring him in the face, was appalling to him.

He had never been a pleasant companion, but then he was a good sailor and so Harman had taken him on board the Spray, while also he was not a native Rover, but one, like himself, who had been made captain by the Islanders, and taken the Death Oath to become a member of the Sea League.

To those who had trusted him and spared his life he now sought to turn traitor, and so the skipper and crew of the Spray felt no sympathy for him now as he stood on the brink of a grave in the sea.

"Does the Queen mean that the man is surely to die, Captain Harman?" asked Dunbar Kennon, of the young skipper.

"Yes, señor, I have her orders and he must die."

"Will she not relent?"

"Oh, no; and why should she, for, as you said, he would betray the Islanders the moment he felt himself in safety?"

"It is true; but I did not know whether she would remain firm."

And Dunbar Kennon seemed to cherish the hope in his heart that Zulita would yet relent.

But the doomed man was now loaded with irons, and the plank had been placed over the bulwark to leeward.

"Come, señor, if you know your prayers call them to your lips, for you must die within five minutes," said Harman, sternly.

"Will not that iron-hearted woman spare me?"

"The Queen Zulita has given me her orders, so have no hope she will countermand them."

"Oh, may Heaven's curses fall upon you, ay, and upon you all!"

"A dying man prays this of Heaven!" almost shrieked the man.

"Lead him up the plank, men!" sternly ordered Harman.

And two of the Spray's crew sprung forward and grasped the traitor by the arms.

He struggled, but, ironed as he was, could offer little resistance, and he was dragged up the plank to the bulwark.

"Will you walk over, señor, or shall my men hurl you into the sea?" cried Harman, anxious to get the fearful scene quickly ended.

"No! no! spare me, and I will revoke my curses upon you!"

"Into the sea with him!" ordered Harman, after a glance at the cabin companionway to see if Zulita meant to relent, for he was sure that she heard all that was happening upon deck.

But no word came from Zulita, and she did not appear, and in obedience to the stern command of the young skipper the two men hurled the sailor into the sea.

There was a wild shriek from his lips, a plunge, and he had gone to his grave in the ocean depths while the pretty vessel sped on her way.

A few moments after Zulita came on deck and glanced about her.

The skies were becoming black with clouds, and she said:

"We are going to have another storm this afternoon."

"Yes, señorita; it certainly looks so," replied Harman, to whom she had spoken.

She made no reference to the tragedy enacted on the deck of the little vessel a few moments before, and her face was as calm as a May morning, though pale.

"Let the oath be taken, Señor Harman," she said, and the men were again called before her.

Then, on bended knees, with right hands resting on their hearts and left hands uplifted toward heaven, the oath was taken by the Queen, Lazuli and the four men, while Dunbar Kennon and Paul stood near, gazing on at the strange scene with something of awe in their hearts.

During the afternoon a storm of great violence broke over the sea and lasted far into the night, while all took comfort in it from the fact that it had also caught the Red Rover cruiser, and her captain would report, when the Spray failed to return to the Island Retreat, that she had been leaking badly, and, unable to withstand the second fierce blow, had foundered at sea beyond all doubt.

By a strange coincidence the Spray did spring a leak in this second storm, and it was decided to run at once for New Orleans, where Harman was anxious to go, and where he could readily sell his little vessel.

Some ten days after, the Spray dropped anchor in the river opposite to the city of New Orleans, and Dunbar Kennon and Paul went ashore.

They went at once to a hotel, and as Dunbar Kennon wrote his name upon the register he saw a man of distinguished appearance standing near and gazing at him in a most peculiar manner.

"Where have I seen his face before?" he mused.

Then, as the stranger still kept his gaze upon him, he saw that it was not so much with a look of recognition that he regarded him, but as though he wished to anger him by his cool stare.

Annoyed by his persistent staring, Dunbar Kennon told the landlord that he desired rooms for himself and others, and was at once shown to the one assigned to him, while Paul accompanied him.

Hardly had he entered when a card was brought to him, and on it was the name:

"DON LEON LAFONTE,

"Mexico."

"I do not remember meeting any one of that name, but suppose that I have forgotten him."

"Ask the gentleman to please come to my room," he said to the servant, who at once disappeared on his errand.

CHAPTER XLII.

DON LEON'S VENDETTA.

THE rooms which Dunbar Kennon had secured in New Orleans were pleasant ones, and he had obtained a handsome suite, for he was to bring to them his bride, the Queen of the Island Rovers, and Harman and his young wife Lazuli were to be his guests also, while he remained in the city waiting for the sailing of a packet-ship for New York.

In answer to his invitation, sent by the hotel servant, to ask Don Leon Lafonte, of Mexico, up to his rooms, that personage soon after put in an appearance.

He was a man of fine physique, with a face that was striking, if not handsome, and a quick, nervous manner that showed an active brain.

He was handsomely dressed, wore considerable jewelry, and spoke English with a marked accent.

His black hair was worn long and a drooping mustache covered his mouth, while his eyes were dark and piercing.

"Walk in, sir, and be seated, while I hope you will pardon my not recognizing where we have met before," said Dunbar Kennon, pleasantly, to his guest, as the latter entered.

He stopped full in front of the American, did not take the extended hand, and replied:

"We have not met before, señor, though I have sought this pleasure for a long time."

"You speak Spanish, I believe?"

"I do, sir, and I would know why I am indebted to you for this visit," was Dunbar Kennon's reply, and there was some anger in his tone, as he did not like the manner of the alleged Mexican.

"You shall soon know, sir, when I tell you that I came to this port some months ago, hoping to find your vessel here, and then sailed for Cuba, where I learned that you were doubtless at Cartagena."

"I went thither, saw your brother officers and obtained information that you had resigned your lieutenantancy and sailed for home, via New Orleans."

"I caught a fast clipper and arrived here but yesterday, when I heard a brother officer, whom you met in the hotel, address you by name, and I knew that I had found my man."

"And why have you thus dogged my steps, Don Leon Lafonte?" asked Dunbar Kennon, his anger arising at the manner of his visitor.

"When your vessel was at Vera Cruz, more than two years ago, you fought a duel, I believe?"

"Is the affair of interest to you, sir?"

"It is."

"And why?"

"You fought a duel with a Mexican officer, a colonel of lanceros, did you not?"

"I did."

"His name was Colonel Santa Leon?"

"Yes."

"He was my half-brother."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, and you killed him?"

"I did, sir."

"We are a revengeful race, Señor Kennon."

"Ah! you seek to avenge your brother?"

"My half-brother, señor," corrected the Mexican.

"It matters not, sir, how close the relationship, but tell me why you are here?"

"To avenge Colonel Santa Leon."

"Ah! you are frank at least, Don Leon Lafonte," and there was a sneer in the voice of the American.

"I wish to learn from your lips, señor, the cause of that duel and all about it."

"A man seeking to avenge a wrong he considers done him, should be well informed upon the cause and all circumstances."

"I am, from others; but I desire to hear your story, señor."

"You are not to sit in judgment upon my acts."

"Still I would hear your story, señor."

"I do not mind telling you, as the affair was not of my seeking."

"As I understood it, Colonel Santa Leon had a great hatred for all Americans, and when a vessel of my country could touch at a Mexican port, he lost no opportunity to insult the officers."

"He was a man of wondrous skill with pistol and sword, and also a professional duelist, and the result was that he killed two American officers and wounded three others whom he insulted and thus forced to fight him."

"This caused American vessels to shun the port of Vera Cruz as much as possible; but as it became necessary for our cruisers to sometimes go there, the officers decided among themselves that they would risk life to kill this professional duelist, your brother."

"My vessel was the first to enter port after this decision, and one of our officers on going ashore was promptly insulted by your brother."

"He was a particular friend of mine, an invalid at the time, and in no condition to fight a duel, so I resented the insult by knocking Colonel Santa Leon down."

"Of course he challenged me, and to his surprise I disarmed him, and the more to his amazement I gave him his life."

"But he demanded a meeting with pistols, and knowing his unerring aim, I determined to kill him or he could do as much for me."

"I did kill him, and my brother officers were avenged."

"I hope you are satisfied with my story, Don Leon Lafonte, and will let the matter rest as it is."

"No, sir, I cannot, and will not."

"I demand satisfaction of you."

"For what?"

"Killing my poor Leon."

"Señor, is not one death in your family sufficient?" was the significant query of the American.

"Not a dozen if honor is at stake, and I demand that you meet me."

"Suppose I refuse, for I am hastening home to a dying father and have most important matters just now pressing upon me?"

"No, señor, the Leons and Lafontes press a vendetta to the bitter end, and if you do not meet me I shall be compelled to say that you are a coward."

"You need not insult me, sir, for I am wholly at your service, as I see that I needs must be."

"If you will give me your address, I will send my second to you three days from this."

"It must be sooner."

"I am the one to select time and weapons, as you are the challenger, and I will meet you only on the third day from this."

"Your address, please."

"This hotel."

"Thank you, and now good-morning, Don Leon Lafonte, for I am desirous of being alone."

There was a dangerous light in the eyes of the young American which forbade the visitor to delay longer, and with a bow of marked politeness he wheeled upon his heel and departed, Paul opening the door for him with a look as though he would like to assist him down-stairs.

CHAPTER XLIII. STRANGELY WEDDED.

It was some days, after the Spray was put on her changed course for New Orleans, before the icy barrier which seemed to have come between Dunbar Kennon and the lovely Pirate Queen was broken.

Leaking, as was the little vessel, and keeping one man constantly at the pumps, all were anxious to get to port as soon as possible, and all sail was crowded upon her.

In the loss of one of his men by execution, Harman was short-handed, and Dunbar Kennon at once offered his services, and they were accepted, the young skipper asking him to take charge of the vessel, while he himself acted as mate.

As Zulita also requested this, Dunbar acquiesced, while Paul took charge of the caboose and proved himself a most proficient cook and steward.

One night as Dunbar Kennon came on deck to take his trick at the wheel, he found that Zulita had not retired, but was standing near leaning on the taffrail, gazing at the new moon which was nearing the horizon.

The vessel was bowling along at a seven-knot pace under easy sail, and the sound of the pump forward was as steady as the tap of a drum on the march.

Harman was forward, having just been relieved from the helm by Dunbar Kennon, and had thrown himself into a hammock swung from the fore-castle to the foremast, while the only other person visible was the man at the pump.

"You keep late hours, señorita," said Dunbar Kennon, not at all adverse to finding her there.

"I could not sleep, so came on deck half an hour ago," was the answer.

Not a word, or sign, since her letter, had she given to prove that she had written words of love to the man before her.

No one could have been more modest in her behavior, and she had won more and more his admiration and respect.

That she held over him a greater power than did Valerie Rossmore, outlaw queen though she had been, he could not but admit.

Now, as she stood there, after all that had passed between them, he felt certain that it was for him to speak, and he said:

"I am glad to find you here, Señorita Zulita, for now we can talk together."

She made no reply, and he continued:

"Have you had any reason to regret writing me the letter that you did?"

"No more than that I fear you misunderstood it as unmaidenly on my part," was the low response.

"No, not from you, living as you have done far from those who could have told you that it was for woman to be wooed and won."

"No, I only feel that what you told me you meant."

"I did mean it."

"And do now?"

"Oh, yes."

"My sweet Zulita, had I been a dweller among your people your beautiful face and frank nature would have won my heart, and I would have longed to have your love."

"As it was, I owe you my life, and you saved me again from a fearful death, while you also give me your love."

"I wrote you that I was engaged to another, and it is true; but I will confess that you hold sway over my heart stronger than hers."

"Had I not met you I would have continued to love her and she would have become my wife."

"Had I met you first, no love for her would ever have found place in my heart."

"It is better that I go to her and tell her frankly the whole truth, and that I have made you my wife."

"My own life I had a right to sacrifice, if so I wished, but that of Paul it was my duty to save, even at my own sacrifice, and had you been ever so hideous, ever so hateful to me, I would have consented to make you my wife, if for his sake only."

"Now, Zulita, you know just how I feel toward you, and when we reach New Orleans, I will go ashore, engage rooms at a hotel, for we will have to wait at least some days for a packet ship to New York, as I know their days of sailing, and I will seek a priest and have him return with me to the Spray and then make you my wife, and also unite Captain Harman to Lazuli."

"What says Zulita, my pretty Pirate Queen?"

"I will do as you say in all things, señor; but do not call me Pirate Queen, but let us forever forget the Island Rovers and never more bring them into our lives."

"I feel sorry for the one to whom you pledged your love, but you are my idol and I cannot give you up, and, if she is beautiful, and rich, she can find another to love her."

"As for Lazuli, she will remain with Señor Harman in New Orleans, and they will have riches enough to keep them from want, and the others of the crew can go their way, and I will see that what gold they have shall be doubled, while you, my dear señor, will not find me a poor bride on your hands, as I have a small fortune in gems."

"Bless you, my sweet Zulita, I have also a fortune to offer you with my heart and hand, and were it not for the thought that my poor father is sorely ill, and that I must bring grief to the heart of Valerie Rossmore, I could indeed be a very happy man."

And thus was the compact renewed between the two, and, upon the arrival of the Spray in port, as has been seen Dunbar Kennon secured his rooms at the hotel; but across his path drifted Don Leon Lafonte of Mexico.

But the priest was found and taken on board the Spray, and there in the little cabin a double wedding ceremony was performed, which made Zulita the wife of Dunbar Kennon, and Lazuli the bride of Harman Du Bose.

The three men comprising the crew had already been dismissed, happy with golden souvenirs bestowed upon them, and the little Spray was turned over to the purchaser to whom her skipper had already sold her, while Harman and his pretty bride accompanied Dunbar Kennon and Zulita to their pleasant quarters in the hotel, which Paul had made into a perfect bower of roses in honor of the happy event.

And yet Paul was not as happy as he looked, for though he greatly liked Zulita, he would shake his head ominously when alone and mutter to himself:

"What will Missy Valerie say and do, I wonder?"

And it was just this thought that troubled Dunbar Kennon too, while he also could not but bear in mind that he had a deadly appointment on his hands with Don Leon Lafonte the Mexican.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE TELL-TALE CREST.

It was the third day after the double wedding, and the two handsome couples were the cynosure of all eyes in the hotel and wherever they went.

Among the Island Rovers, though Spanish had been the language of the people, English, French and Portuguese was also spoken by many, and both Zulita and Lazuli could converse quite fluently in both English and French, while their accent in the former gave a greater charm to them.

Who they were the busybodies could not find out, other than that an American and a French gentleman had married two Mexican ladies of great beauty and wealth, for the two fair Island Rovers were supposed to be from Mexico.

Remembering his appointment with Don Leon Lafonte, and also that the New York packet-ship sailed in two days, Dunbar Kennon was anxious to get the affair with the alleged Mexican settled.

So he went to Harman Du Bose and told him of the whole affair, at the same time asking him to seek out the Don and ascertain who was his second.

Harman had taken a wonderful liking to the young American sailor, and was glad to have an opportunity of serving him, so he went at once to call upon Don Leon.

He found that gentleman in his room, apparently awaiting a message from Dunbar Kennon.

He greeted Harman politely, and when he learned why he had come, at once sent a servant for a friend who had promised to serve him as second.

This friend, a young Creole swell about town, soon arrived, and seemed only anxious to be engaged in an affair of honor, especially when he knew that Don Leon was engaged in a vendetta, which meant that he should kill Dunbar Kennon.

The preliminaries were soon arranged, swords being chosen as the weapons, with pistols at ten paces to fall back upon if the blades failed in doing the deadly work cut out for them.

The time of the meeting was appointed for an hour before sunset that evening, as Señor Harman intimated that his principal had an engagement at a later hour and was anxious to kill his adversary before the time at which he would have to keep his appointment.

All being satisfactory, Harman returned to Dunbar Kennon, and an hour after they entered a carriage and drove to the place of meeting, Paul having mounted the box as driver.

It was upon the spot where many a deadly feud had been settled before, just out of the limits of the city, and beneath the shade of some majestic live-oaks.

The Don and his second had not arrived, but soon after drove up, the former remarking to his companion:

"I like always to be first on the field, monsieur, for I am superstitious enough to believe the last comer fares the worse."

"Nonsense," said the young Creole, and stepping up to Harman he raised his hat, and they walked aside to arrange for the meeting.

The Don seemed a trifle nervous, from some cause, while Dunbar Kennon was the very picture of perfect indifference.

Soon the two confronted each other, and both were masters of the sword; but the American was the master of his adversary, and after a few skillful thrusts and parries by each, disarmed the Don.

"I killed your brother, señor, so give you your life."

Don Leon was in a towering rage.

He had not believed it possible for mortal man to disarm him, and he at once demanded a second meeting with pistols.

Dunbar Kennon smiled, and bowed assent when Harman approached him with the demand; but he was determined that one only of the two pistols should be loaded with ball.

"Harman, I will try my luck against his, and I will win," he said, with perfect confidence.

Harman shook his head, as though not liking to have Dunbar Kennon take the chances, and told to the Creole the terms his principal demanded.

As the Don was determined to have another meeting, he was forced to accept the only terms which his enemy would allow, and so the two were placed ten paces apart, the long-barreled, handsome dueling-pistols were placed upon a handkerchief midway between them, one of them being loaded with a bullet, the other simply with powder.

Then a toss was made for the first choice and Dunbar Kennon won.

Stepping forward, he picked up the pistol nearest to the Don and returned to his place.

The Don of course took the other weapon.

Just then Paul advanced quickly toward Harman, and said something to him in a low tone.

Instantly Harman Du Bose stepped up to Dunbar Kennon, and said in a whisper:

"Paul says that the Don is the French sword-master of Farmer Fairfield."

"Ah! pray give the order to fire, Señor Harman, for I am ready," was the response.

The order was given and the Don fired quickly, but without result, and an oath escaped his lips.

Then it was Dunbar Kennon's turn, and he said:

"My dear Don, I again give you your life, and to prove it, will simply clip that curl from your left temple, to keep as a souvenir of you."

Quick as a flash the pistol cracked, and a dark curl, which stood out upon the left side of the Don's head fell to the ground.

Stepping forward Dunbar Kennon picked it up, and with a bow and a close glance at the Don walked toward his carriage.

Harman followed, and Don Leon Lafonte and his second were left in possession of the field, a strange expression upon the face of the former, as he stood in his tracks motionless as a statue, and seemingly dazed at what had happened.

"I believe you are right, Paul; but how on earth did you recognize him?" said Dunbar Kennon, as they drove away toward the city.

"He rolled up his sleeve in the sword combat, master, and I saw a crest on his arm in Indian ink, which I had seen before, and last remembered that it was the day when you fought Farmer Fairfield, sir."

"Then it came back to me, sir, where I had seen him before."

"You are right, for I now recall his face and the crest."

"It is Fairfield, then, whom he has come to avenge, and his story about Colonel Santa Leon having been his brother was false."

"He has been dogging me around, and learning of that affair, used it to suit himself."

Arriving at the hotel, they found Zulita and Lazuli anxiously awaiting them, for they had been told of the duel.

The next day when Harman made inquiries at the hotel, he found that Don Leon Lafonte had departed, gone no one knew whither, and soon after Dunbar Kennon, his lovely bride and Paul, went on board the packet ship, farewells were said to Lazuli and her husband, who were to make New Orleans their home, and the voyage was begun which must take the gallant young sailor to Cloudlands, when the truth must be made known to Valerie Rossmore that the man she so madly loved and had hoped to wed, was the husband of another.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE RETURN TO CLOUDLANDS.

DUNBAR KENNON reached his home just after the doctor had told Valerie Rossmore to have a talk with Captain Kennon upon all that he desired done after his death, as his life was fast ebbing away.

A few more days, the physician had said, will bring the end.

With a sigh Valerie had expressed the wish:

"Oh, that Dunbar were only here!"

And almost following the utterance of the words, there was heard the roll of an approaching vehicle, a carriage drew up at the door, and in the one who sprang out Valerie Rossmore recognized in the moonlight, the one for whose presence she had just longed.

With a cry of joy she sprang toward him, and then stopped, for she saw him turn and aid some one else to alight, while Paul, who had sprung from the box, where he had been seated with the driver, held the door open for the second person to get out of the vehicle.

Offering his arm to the one whom he had aided to alight, Dunbar Kennon ascended the steps to the piazza, while Valerie saw that his companion was a woman.

With no thought of who that woman could be, she advanced quickly and said:

"Oh, Dunbar! how glad I am to see you again at Cloudlands."

"Only just now I longed to have you here, for your father—"

"Quick, Valerie, tell me of my father?"

"He can last but a short while longer," and Valerie seemed hurt at the manner in which she had been met by the heir of Cloudlands.

"My dear Valerie, I am indeed glad to get home once more; but let me present to you the Señora Zulita, and beg that you will show her to her room, while you come into the library, for I have something important to tell you."

His manner was kind and yet restrained, and Valerie knew not what to think.

Who was this Señora Zulita?

She was deeply veiled, and had spoken no word, merely bowing at her introduction to her.

With no suspicion of the truth Valerie said:

"No, no, not in the library, for your father is there, as he has refused to take to his bed."

"We will go into the parlor, and then I must break the news of your coming to him."

"Well, Paul, I am glad to see you home again."

"And I love you, Missy Valerie," replied Paul, as he grasped the little hand extended to him.

"Only the grasp of Dunbar's hand—no kiss, no fond word," murmured Valerie, as she turned

and bade Zulita accompany her up-stairs, at the same time telling Dunbar she would join him in the parlor in a moment.

Too well bred to ask Zulita a question as to who she was, Valerie ushered her into a lovely chamber, bade her make herself comfortable and said that she would send her maid to look after her wants.

"I will order supper, Señora Zulita, and will come for you when it is ready," she said, as she left the room.

Zulita had merely bowed her thanks, hardly daring to trust herself to speak.

As the door closed she dropped into an easy-chair and said:

"Poor, poor girl!"

"Now will come her sorrow indeed."

"I am sorry now, when I look upon her beautiful face, that he ever came across my path."

"No! no! no! I will not say that, for it was his destiny and mine to meet."

"But she is so lovely, and I feel for her in the sorrow that must be hers."

In the month which had passed since Zulita had been the bride of Dunbar Kennon, he had taught her much of the world into which he was going to take her.

There had been a number of passengers on the packet, and courted and admired by one and all of them, the beautiful young wife had begun to feel her power.

Arriving at New York, Dunbar Kennon had taken a carriage and hastened on to Cloudlands, and across its threshold he had brought a bride, where dwelt one whom he was solemnly pledged to wed.

It was a startling situation for him to face, and a bitter awakening to the truth he feared that it would be for Valerie Rossmore.

Going into the parlor, he stood awaiting her return.

He had schooled Zulita to tell her nothing, to leave all to him.

Valerie had told him that his father was dying, only a few steps away from him.

She had told him that the end was near.

It was indeed a thrilling situation in which he found himself.

Paul had hastened away to the servants' hall, and was to remain dumb until the terrible truth became known.

He pitied his master, and he felt for poor Valerie.

In the parlor, with the light of the lamp shining full upon him, Dunbar Kennon awaited the dread ordeal through which he must pass.

He was very pale, and yet perfectly calm.

He had made up his mind to tell the truth, in so far as he did not compromise Zulita.

He would never unfold her story to the gaze of the world, and bring the finger of scorn upon her.

The story he would tell might have a foundation of truth, but it would not be a stain upon the beautiful woman who had become his bride, the fugitive Queen of the Island Rovers of the Caribbean.

Paul had been sworn to secrecy, and Zulita been schooled in just what he would say, and which she must corroborate when called upon to do so.

Stern and resolute he waited, his thoughts upon the grief he must bestow upon Valerie, and his heart with his dying father.

Then, in spite of himself, Dunbar Kennon started, as he heard the rustle of a dress descending the broad stairs.

A moment more and Valerie Rossmore had entered the parlor.

CHAPTER XLVI.

TELLING VALERIE THE STORY.

"VALERIE, come here and sit by me on the sofa, and listen to what I have to tell you, for I fear I will have to bring grief upon your heart."

So had spoken Dunbar Kennon, in a low, kind voice. He took her hand and led her to a seat by his side.

"Dunbar, how can you have grieved me?" she said, while a dread of she knew not what seized upon her heart.

"First, Valerie, I would ask you one question?"

"Yes, Cousin Dunbar?"

"Is Frank Fairfield dead?"

She started, but answered:

"I thought that you knew that he was not, for I wrote you of his recovery."

"Your letter never reached me giving me such information, and in fact I have had but two letters from you, and one from father, since I departed, so you may know my suspense."

"It must have been fearful, Dunbar."

"It was a hard cross to me, Valerie; but, upon receiving your letter, bidding me come home at once, as father was so ill, I determined to do so, and at once tendered my resignation, and got leave to come on pending its acceptance."

"It is a strange story, Valerie, that I have to tell you, for Paul and myself took a small coaster to run down and head off the north-bound packet, and the men attempted to kill us; but we overpowered them, a storm blew our craft out to sea and we were wrecked upon an island which proved to be a pirate retreat."

"There were other captives there, among them a fair young girl, who was destined to become the wife of the pirate chief, and thus possessed certain liberties which she put to good use, for she was enabled to plan her escape and ours, and, as I owed my life to her and saw that she had learned to love me, I determined, Valerie, thrown together as we were, to protect her as it was in my power to do."

She uttered no word, but gazed into his face in a way that showed that she was drinking in to heart and brain all that he uttered.

"I told her, Valerie, that I was pledged to you, and yet I could not but tell her that had I known her first, I would not have loved you."

"As we were upon a vessel together for a long time, she became dearer and dearer to me, and I saw that she loved me more and more."

"Are you listening to me, Valerie?"

"To every word," she said, in a tone so hoarse that it fairly startled him.

"I knew that this poor girl's parents were dead, that she had no kindred that she could go to, not a soul in the world to love her but me."

"She had risked her life to save Paul and myself, and she had, in fact, risked more, for fearful would have been her fate had she been recaptured or suspected of aiding us to escape."

"But her plans were well-laid, and others who were captives there also owed their escape to her."

"Upon reaching port, Valerie, I did that which I felt that it was my duty to do."

"The beautiful girl was under my protection, and homeless, friendless, with no one to turn to, nowhere to go."

"To come to you with a lie that I loved you dearer than all else would have been a sin, and I would not do so, because Zulita had shown me that the love I had felt for you was such as a brother might feel for a sister."

"And so, Valerie, I acted as I felt that I was compelled in honor to do."

"I made Zulita my wife!"

A moan escaped her lips and her head bent over until it rested in her hands.

He saw her whole form quiver with emotion, and yet he could utter no word of sympathy.

The blow had fallen heavily and he had dealt it as gently as he could.

He pitied her and he loved her, and yet, as he saw her bent in grief there before him, he knew that he spoke the truth when he had told her that the affection he felt for her was such as a brother might feel for a sister.

"Valerie, I have told you all, so let me call you my sister now."

Instantly her form was raised and her face looked into his own.

What he saw there fairly startled him, for in that short time the face had become haggard, the features set, and the expression one he could not understand.

She tried to speak and failed.

But with a great effort she controlled her voice and said:

"I thank you, Dunbar, for having told me all."

"I loved you with all my soul, and I had looked forward to being your wife."

"But that hope is past; the old love is gone now, and henceforth you are as my brother!"

"Kiss me, brother Dunbar!"

He obeyed, but the lips were cold and returned not the kiss.

"Now I will go and tell your father that you have come, and that you have brought a bride home with you."

"I will soon return."

He was amazed at her calm manner, and she glided from the room, leaving him in a strange frame of mind.

She was gone but a few moments and then returned.

"Dunbar, your father will see you; but he is very weak."

"You told him that I had brought a wife home with me?" he asked, uneasily.

"Yes, I told him that you and your bride had arrived."

"And what said he, Valerie?"

"He asked me if I spoke the truth."

"And then?"

"Bade me tell you to come to him at once, and that I was to accompany you."

"Come!" and he held forth his hand to lead her.

But she drew back quickly, and said:

"No, I need no aid, for I am strong, as you see."

"Your bringing a bride home has not broken my heart, Dunbar," and she laughed lightly.

But it was a laugh that he did not like.

Leaving the parlor, they crossed the hall to the wing, where the library was situated, and the next moment Dunbar Kennon was in the presence of his father, and the look that he met from a dying man, almost froze the blood in his heart.

CHAPTER XLVII.

DISOWNED.

SEATED in the easy-chair, in which he had been slowly dying for weeks, Captain Kennon knew that the sands of his life had well-nigh run

out, for only a short while ago the doctor had told him that at the furthest he had but a week to live.

"I tell you this, Captain Kennon, so that you can make all of your final arrangements," the doctor had said.

"They are all made."

"Your will and all?"

"Yes, for I have but one heir; but, as life is uncertain, I made my will in favor of my ward, who is to be Dunbar's wife, with the understanding that if aught happened to him, she was to get all; but if he returned in safety, then she was, upon her marriage with him, transfer all claims over to him to right and title."

"You know the boy is pirate-hunting in the Caribbean Sea, and it is deadly work, doctor."

"True, sir," responded the doctor, who had never seen the captain so perfectly calm before.

"Then there is nothing that you wish done, while you have strength to attend to it?"

"No; but I wish Dunbar would come home," and an anxious look crept into the eyes of the dying man.

"You have had no word from him?"

"Not for months."

"Would you wish to see a clergyman, Captain Kennon?" kindly asked the doctor, who, unable to do anything more for his bodily good, thought that perhaps a priest was needed to doctor his soul.

He was fairly startled at the effect of his question upon the man.

"A clergyman? A priest to see me?"

"What do I want a priest for?"

"What have I to confess?"

"Do you know anything I have to confess?"

"Speak, sir; do you know anything that I have to confess, that I should see a priest?"

The old man fairly foamed with rage, and the doctor was frightened at the blaze he had kindled.

The look, the words of his patient convinced him that there was something he had to confess, but he dared not say so.

He knew full well that his patient had been dying from secret causes, which medicines would not cure.

"But he said gently:

"Be calm, I pray you, my dear sir, or you may end your life suddenly by your excitement."

"This is a religious community, and I knew not but that, like others, you might wish to have a minister pray with you."

"No, sir, I want no prayers."

"I am beyond the aid of prayer, and I shall die with my lips sealed to the world."

"Did I not hear a carriage drive up, doctor?"

"I will see, sir."

The doctor disappeared, glad to escape from the room, and he found that Dunbar Kennon had come home.

So he hastened back to the sick-room and told Captain Kennon that his son's baggage had arrived and that he would soon follow it.

The news seemed to affect the dying man strangely, and the doctor distinctly caught the muttered words:

"Oh! that I had died before he came."

"But I must not shrink now, must die with the seal upon my lips."

Giving his patient a soothing potion the doctor took his leave, and soon after Valerie entered the room.

What passed between the two, what she told him, was that which had brought to the face of Captain Kennon the look which so startled Dunbar upon his entrance.

"Father, how glad I am to see you again, and to find you sitting up, for I feared I would find you in bed," and the young sailor walked quickly forward to grasp his father's hands.

But they were held from him, while in a deep voice came the words:

"For but one thing, sir, I would that you had found me dead."

"Father!"

"Silence! and hear me."

"That one thing is that I have yet life, yet strength to strike you hard, Dunbar Kennon, though the icy grip of death is upon me."

"Father, in Heaven's name what do you mean?"

"You have brought with you a bride, I hear?"

"I have, father, a beautiful woman, as lovely in character as in person, and I wish you to meet her."

"Never! let her not darken the threshold of my door, unless you wish not my dying curse to fall upon her, as it shall fall upon you."

Dunbar Kennon fairly quivered with emotion.

He was livid as a corpse, and his face was full of anguish.

He shrunk back from his father as he spoke, and he stood before him as though powerless to utter a word in his defense or to speak.

"You have brought a wife, you say?" hissed the old man.

"I have, sir," was the hoarse reply.

"And yet you were engaged to that lovely

woman there?" and he pointed his trembling hand at his ward.

"I have told Valerie all, sir, as I will tell you if you will listen."

"Not a word, sir, for you can tell me nothing that can palliate your crime."

"You have broken your pledge to the loveliest of women to marry an accursed—"

"Hold! Father, dare you utter one word against my wife, and by the God above I will strike you dead!"

Like bugle-notes the voice of Dunbar Kennon rang out.

Accustomed to issue his orders in battle and in storm, his voice was loud, clear and ringing, and it rung through the house until it reached the ears of Zulita, his wife, and she glided quickly out of the room into the upper corridor, her face full of pain and excitement.

At his words Captain Kennon fairly shrank back, cowering before the burning eyes bent upon him, while Valerie sprung forward, as though to throw herself before the young sailor and protect his father from him.

But instantly Dunbar Kennon regained his self-control, and dropping upon his knees he cried:

"Father, forgive me, but do not cast an unkind word upon my wife, I pray you, for the love of Heaven!"

"Rise, sir, and you, Valerie, bid Roper go at once after my lawyer, telling him to bring two witnesses with him, for I have work for him to do."

"Send Morgan, also, for the doctor, for I shall need his aid."

"You, sir, leave my presence, and when you are wanted I will send for you."

Dunbar Kennon again stepped toward his father, with an appealing glance for a word of kindness from him; but the old man shrunk far back in his chair and cried:

"Leave me, or I will have my servants hurl you from the room."

Dunbar Kennon's face flushed, and there was a light in his eyes that boded no good should the servants make the attempt.

Then he wheeled on his heel and strode from the room, going at once to the chamber whither Valerie had taken his wife.

"Oh, Dunbar! I have heard all."

"Is it not awful? and you suffer for my sake!"

And she grasped his hands earnestly.

"It was an awful scene, Zulita, and my father is dying; but you are a noble little woman, and I would suffer as much more for your sweet sake."

"Come, let us sit here by the window, for the calm moonlight will soothe me."

And he threw himself down by the window, while Zulita knelt by his side, her hands upon his knees.

They saw Roper drive away in the carriage and Morgan ride away on horseback, and the time passed slowly by.

Then Morgan returned accompanied by the doctor, whom he had overtaken on the road, and an hour after the carriage drove up and two persons alighted therefrom.

Soon after there came a knock upon the door. It was Valerie.

"Dunbar, your father would see you, and he says that you are to bring your wife."

"I will go, but Zulita shall not until I know what his humor is," was the stern reply.

Bidding Zulita await him, he descended the steps with Valerie without speaking a word.

The lawyer was there and arose and greeted him, presenting a friend who had accompanied him.

But Captain Kennon's face had become even more stern and hard and he said, hoarsely:

"I sent for you, sir, to know how I meant to punish you."

"Where is your beautiful bride?"

There was a sneer in his voice; but unheeding it, Dunbar Kennon replied quietly:

"I bade her not to come, sir, where she was unwelcome."

"As you please, for you are the one to feel, and she shall suffer through you."

"Have you written that codicil to my will, Mr. Lockwood?"

"I have, sir," was the attorney's reply.

"Read it."

The lawyer read as follows:

"In consideration of the fact that in my foregoing will I have bequeathed to my kinswoman and ward, Valerie Rossmore, all of my riches, personal and otherwise, to hold in keeping for my son Dunbar Kennon, and to be by her bestowed upon him when she became his wife, I now revoke the bestowal of said fortune by Valerie Rossmore, upon said Dunbar Kennon, and do make her my full heir to every dollar of property I possess in the world, for her own use, and to do with as she deems right, while I hereby utterly disown Dunbar Kennon as my son, and disinherit him from all right and title to that which is my own, cutting him off without a cent of benefit derived from me."

"Given under my hand, etc."

Here followed the date, and taking the pen handed to him by the lawyer, the vindictive man signed his name in a bold hand, and then bade the friend of the attorney and the doctor sign their names as witnesses.

"Is this irrevocable, my dear Captain Kennon?" asked the doctor.

"It is, sir," was the stern reply.

The names of the witnesses were at once signed, and Dunbar Kennon was disowned.

"Good-by, father," and he held out his hand.

"Go, sir!"

He looked one instant upon the face of the dying man and turned away.

At the door stood Paul, who had heard all that had been done.

"Paul, will you still cast your lot with me?" asked Dunbar Kennon, sadly.

"Yes, master; rich or poor, you are the same to me, sir."

"The carriage we came in remained for the night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get it ready, and then come to my old room, for there are a few things there that are mine, and I will take them."

So saying Dunbar Kennon sought Zulita, and half an hour after the carriage that had brought them there rolled away in the moonlight, and Dunbar Kennon, the disowned son, had left Cloudlands, the home of his birth, and of two generations of his name before him.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

ADRIPT.

FROM Cloudlands Dunbar Kennon drove to the town not far distant, and there put up at a hotel for the remainder of the night.

He was anxious to remain in the neighborhood until he knew whether his father, after getting over his anger, would revoke his unkind treatment of him.

Seeing that Zulita was greatly distressed on his account, he tried to cheer her up by saying that all would come well.

And yet he knew his father well enough to know that he had a will of iron, and he recalled how inflexible and unforgiving he had been in the past for the slightest offense he had been guilty of as a youth.

Having been most liberal with the money which he had with him, never dreaming for an instant that he would be in need of funds, he found himself disowned, disinherited, and but a few hundred dollars to call his own, while he had a young wife to care for, and Paul also upon his hands.

So to the hotel he went in the little town, and it was in vain that he sought rest in the pleasant quarters assigned to him, for after the fearful ordeal he had passed through sleep would not come to him.

With the morning he arose, and at once sallied forth to see if he could get any news from Cloudlands.

He found Paul already up, and the expression upon the negro's face told him that some news had been heard by him.

"Paul, you have heard news from Cloudlands?" he said, calmly.

"Yes, sir, Roper has just left town."

"Well, Paul?"

"Master, he is dead."

"My father?"

"Yes, sir."

For a moment the young sailor was silent, while his lips quivered.

Then he said:

"Paul, order a saddle-horse for me, for I shall ride over to Cloudlands, as I wish this suspense ended."

In half an hour more he was mounted upon a good animal and going at a gallop to Cloudlands.

Old Toby met him at the door, and tears stood in his eyes, as he said:

"Oh, Master Dunbar, after all these years of service in this family to see you turned out, sir."

"Me and Old Nance is wretched, sir."

"My father is dead, then, Toby?"

"Yes, sir."

"When did he die?"

"About midnight, sir."

"I left at ten."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know if he spoke of me again?"

"No, sir."

"Or whether he repented his cruel treatment of me, Toby?"

"No, sir, I know nothing more than that he cast you off."

"And Miss Rossmore?"

"Is in her room, sir."

"I must know the worst, Toby, whether my father retracted his cruel words before he died, so ask her if she will see me for a moment."

The man departed and soon after returned.

"Well, Toby?"

"She begs to be excused, sir."

The pale face flushed at this, and for a moment Dunbar Kennon uttered no word.

Then he said:

"Toby, return and say to Miss Rossmore that I desire to know if my father died in anger with me, or whether he left any word of kindness for me?"

Toby returned, but with seeming reluctance.

At his knock at Valerie's door she met him and asked impatiently:

"Why have you come again to trouble me?"

She was dressed in a silk wrapper, and in spite of her grief and loss of rest looked wondrously beautiful.

"My master—" began Toby.

"Who?"

"My master asked me, Miss—"

"Your master lies dead in the library, Toby, so to whom do you refer?"

"Master Dunbar, miss."

"Well, what does he wish?"

"Master Dunbar wishes to know, miss, if his father died in anger with him."

"He did, for Captain Kennon's last words were to utter a curse upon him and his wife."

"So tell him from me, Toby."

The words were uttered slowly, distinctly and with a certain tone that showed she was deeply moved from some cause.

Toby sighed and went away, walking slowly down the stairs, for he felt grieved at having to bear the message to his young master.

"Well, Toby?" asked Dunbar Kennon as the man approached him.

Toby repeated the words of Valerie Rossmore just as she had uttered them.

He saw the young sailor flinch, shut his teeth, and knew how deep was the wound given him.

"Master, where will you go?" he asked in a sad tone.

"I do not know, Toby."

"Have you much money, sir?"

"Only a few hundred, Toby, to last me until I can get something to do, for I have resigned from the navy."

"There's my little home, sir, above on the river a few miles, and it's all furnished quite comfortable, the tenants having just left it; if you wish to go there, sir, you are welcome, while the coasting trade is good if you could charter a small craft."

"I thank you, Toby, and for the present I will go to your little home, for I know it well, and a cozy place it is; but I will return now to the town, and turn my back upon dear old Cloudlands forever."

"Good-by, Toby," and, as though not wishing to trust himself to say more, Dunbar Kennon sprang upon his horse and rode rapidly away.

And from the window of her room Valerie Rossmore watched his departure and when he had disappeared from sight in the forest, threw herself upon her bed and burst into tears which seemed wrung from the very depths of her heart.

When he reached the hotel Paul met him at the door.

"Well, Paul, Captain Kennon died at midnight last night, and he disowned me and died with a curse upon his lips against me."

"But I wish you to go up to Toby's cottage upon the river and prepare it for our coming, as it will be our home for the present."

"From Cloudlands to almost a hovel," muttered Paul as he turned away.

Then he added:

"I always was afraid of her, and I know that she made Master Kennon do as he did, but she will not be happy with all her riches, for she dearly loves him."

Such was Paul's opinion as he went on the mission his master sent him on, while the latter entered the room where Zulita awaited his coming with great anxiety.

She came forward and kissed him, and his face told her that some dread thing had happened.

"Oh, Dunbar, is there more trouble upon you?" she asked eagerly.

"Zulita, my father is dead."

"Dead! but he forgave you for making me your wife?"

"No, he did not, and I am sent adrift in the world without a dollar, except the few hundreds that I have, when I expected to bring you to be mistress of grand old Cloudlands and give you all that heart could desire."

"Dunbar, is not this her revenge?"

"You mean Valerie's?"

"Yes."

"I cannot believe it of her, Zulita; but I am poor now and will have to go to work."

"But I am rich, my dear husband, and you know that all I have is yours."

"Bless you, Zulita; but what you deem riches are not what we call a fortune here."

"But my gems!"

"Are worth a few thousand dollars, Zulita, but they will at least purchase me a vessel, and I can make a good living for us with a good craft, for there is money to be made in the coasting trade."

"But while I am looking about what it is best to do we will move to Toby's snug little cottage on the river and make it our home; so get ready, Zulita, to go with me."

And to the little cottage they went that day, and Zulita seemed really to enjoy the change, or at least she said so, and certainly did all she could to make Dunbar Kennon feel that she was contented.

The next day the master of Cloudlands was laid to rest in the family burying-ground on the estate, and the whole neighborhood turned out to attend his burial, while from lip to lip went the strange news that Dunbar Kennon had returned home with a Mexican bride, and his father

had disowned and disinherited him, leaving Cloudlands and the rest of his vast fortune to his niece, Valerie Rossmore.

And, robed in deep mourning, Valerie Rossmore attended the funeral, her heavy veil hiding her face so that no one saw what that face revealed, sorrow for the dead, anger at having been deceived by Dunbar Kennon, or triumph at her good fortune.

"Now Frank Fairfield will again become her lover," said one.

And this belief seemed to be shared by many, while others wondered if the losing of his fortune would not make Dunbar Kennon revengeful and bring him face to face with the young farmer in another duel.

But Dunbar Kennon, as heir to Cloudlands, and as the disowned son, were two different persons, and so none of the neighbors cared to call upon him and his young bride in Toby's humble little cottage, while many thought it strange that he should still remain near his old home, and believed that he had some deep purpose in doing so.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE SWORDMASTER RETURNS.

SEVERAL months passed away after the death of Captain Kennon and yet Valerie Rossmore remained in seclusion at Cloudlands.

She still kept the same retinue of servants, and the stables were filled with horses; but she never left the estate except to drive out of an afternoon or to take a ride on horseback, and she was always alone.

Her face, so said those who had seen her, had lost some of its brightness, but was still most beautiful, though tinged with sadness; but whether the sadness thereon was caused from grief at the death of her guardian, Captain Kennon, or from sorrow at losing Dunbar Kennon, no one knew.

Her servants said that she never spoke of either the father or son, and had had the room of the latter closed up and locked.

She managed her estate, too, it was said, in a most able manner, and seldom was it that she had to call in the aid of her attorney, Ingersoll Lockwood, in whose hands Captain Kennon had left the settlement of his affairs.

As for Dunbar Kennon, after a few weeks' stay at Toby's cottage he had gone away with his wife, and Paul had accompanied them, and Skipper Douglass, whose little packet-schooner ran to New York, reported that he had seen the disinherited heir upon the deck of a trim brig which he had heard was in the West Indian trade.

He had recognized Dunbar Kennon and noted that he seemed to be in command, while Zulita and Paul he also saw upon the brig's deck.

At this people shook their heads ominously, and were wont to say that the end of the Cloudlands inheritance was not yet.

One day, some five months after the death of the old master of Cloudlands, the neighborhood was surprised to learn that Monsieur Pierre Gerard, the French swordmaster, had returned to Cedar Hall to live.

On this occasion it was said that he did not come to serve as valet, but simply as fencing-master, and it got out from the servants that he had been well received by the young farmer, and had been given one of the best rooms in Cedar Hall.

It certainly seemed to surprise Frank Fairfield to see Monsieur Gerard drive up one day and spring out of a vehicle from the town.

His greeting was by no means a cordial one; but the swordmaster appeared not to notice it, and the two entered the library together.

"Well, you failed, of course?" said the former, petulantly, as he threw himself into a chair.

"It certainly was through no fault of mine, monsieur, as I was anxious indeed to win the large price you set upon your foe's life."

"Sh—not so loud; but why, then, did you not win it?"

"I will tell you, monsieur. I did as you told me, went on the track of Lieutenant Kennon's vessel, and visited Vera Cruz, where I hoped to find her. While there I heard of a duel which he had fought there with a professional duelist, one Colonel Santa Leon, who hated Americans and had slain several in encounters."

"He met our friend and was killed by him, and so I took Santa Leon as a clew, and pretended to be his half-brother, seeking to avenge him."

"I found the vessel-of-war to which the lieutenant was attached, and discovered that he had returned home."

"Coming back via New Orleans I met him there, told him I was Don Leon Lafonte, the half-brother of Santa Leon, and demanded a meeting."

"He had just arrived on a vessel with several others, and to my surprise, I found out that he had brought a Mexican wife with him."

"I, however, met him upon the field, and he cleverly disarmed me, for he is a wonderful swordsman, and he gave me my life."

"Then we fought with pistols, one of which was loaded with ball."

"I fired, and saw that I had gotten the wrong pistol, and he simply spared my life again, clipping one of my long curls from my head."

"I waited until my beard grew out again, and then cutting my hair took passage in a brig bound from New Orleans to New York."

"To my great surprise, in the skipper of that brig I found Monsieur Kennon."

"He recognized me, told me of his father's death and that he had been disinherited, and so had gone to work for his living, and further stated that he was glad that he had not killed you."

"Did he not recognize you as Don Leon, think you?"

"No, sir, and he presented me to his beautiful wife, and after landing I came on here."

"And did not kill him?"

"No, as you are well aware, but is the offer still open?"

"No, for he is married now, so no longer a rival."

"And Miss Rossmore?"

"Is more in love with him than ever, while she is now mistress of Cloudlands and got all of Kennon's property."

"She is not to be given up by any means, monsieur."

"No; but did Kennon say aught else about me?"

"He referred to you as simply a scamp, whom he caught cheating at cards, when you were in the same ship together, and also that he had forced you to resign and leave the navy."

"Curses on him, did he say this?"

"Yes, monsieur; but said he had kept your secret until something that had happened of late had given him reason to believe that you had put an assassin upon his track, and if he discovered it was the truth, he would expose you, as he did not wish Miss Rossmore to throw herself away upon you."

"I tell you, monsieur, my heart almost stood still as he spoke of you putting an assassin upon his track; but he did not suspect me, and so I came to warn you and again offer my services."

Frank Fairfield's face flushed and paled alternately at the words of the Frenchman, and then he said:

"I may need you, Gerard, so remain here as my fencingmaster alone."

"As for his threat about Miss Rossmore, I shall at once call upon that lady and know if, now that Dunbar Kennon is no longer bound to her, and is a mere pauper, he shall dictate what I shall do or not do."

So saying Frank Fairfield ordered his carriage and drove boldly over to see the young mistress of Cloudlands.

CHAPTER L.

THE COMPACT RENEWED.

NEVER in her life did Valerie Rossmore look more beautiful than when clad in her mourning morning-robe she sat in the shade of the piazza reading a novel.

A bunch of red roses were at her breast, and were in striking contrast to her lily-like complexion and sable robe.

Her face was saddened by what she had passed through; but it only beautified it, and she appeared to have gained in loveliness rather than to have lost during the months which had passed since the death of Captain Kennon.

A sound catching her ears caused her to look down toward the highway and she saw a carriage just turning into the gate at Cloudlands. "It is the Cedar Hall carriage, and coming here. Can Frank Fairfield intend to call?" she mused.

It certainly seemed so, for the vehicle drew up at the door and Farmer Fairfield sprang out.

Valerie had not changed her position, but rose as the young farmer ascended the steps and approached her.

"This is an unexpected honor, Mr. Fairfield, for it has been long since you were last at Cloudlands."

She spoke quietly, and did not even hold out her hand to greet her visitor.

His face flushed, but he replied:

"I wished to come over and see you, to express both my sympathy in your affliction and congratulations that you are mistress of Cloudlands."

"Thank you for both, Mr. Fairfield; but may I ask if you have entirely recovered from your wound, for it has been four months and more since we met?"

"Yes, and yet at times I suffer, which of course makes me feel revengeful toward Dunbar Kennon, as you doubtless do."

"And why?"

"From all I have heard, you have had good cause."

She did not change color, but replied:

"Oh, you refer to his bringing a wife home with him, when he was expected to marry me?"

"Yes."

"Well, he got a wife and lost a fortune, and I got a fortune and lost a husband, so I think I am the more to be congratulated."

"Certainly, if you did not love him."

"But I did, though I am not one to break my heart through a desperate love."

He felt ill at ease, but had to carry out his intention in coming.

The woman fascinated him more and more, and he not only loved her, in his way, but she was considered the richest woman in the State, and Cloudlands, joined to his own estates, would make him the possessor of a princely fortune.

So he said:

"Have you forgotten, Miss Rossmore, that I ever held a place in your heart?"

"Oh no; I gave you up for the handsomer and richer man."

"Call it so, and you lost him."

"Yes, so the field is open to others."

"Do you recall a compact we once made?"

"In the forest while out riding one day?"

"Yes."

"I recall it, but suppose you refresh my memory."

She smiled sweetly, as though talking upon the most ordinary matter.

"You were to be my wife, I believe, if you did not marry Dunbar Kennon?"

"No, you have it wrong, sir."

"Correct me, pray."

"You remember that in case Dunbar Kennon should die I was to marry you, for I told you I cared not to live an old maid."

"Ah, so it was; but he is as good as dead to you."

"No; he is simply married, and his wife might die, under which circumstance he would be able to marry again."

"I see; and you would marry him?" hotly said the young farmer.

"I did not say so; but in possession of his fortune as I am, it would be but right to give him the preference."

And again she smiled sweetly.

"You are a strange woman, Valerie Rossmore."

"I am glad, for I hate to be commonplace."

"But I have some claim, Miss Rossmore, and I offer you my heart, hand and fortune, as I did once before."

"I cannot consider it under any circumstances except such as our compact called for."

"Do you mean the death of Dunbar Kennon?"

"Yes."

"And why?"

"Well, I have not broken my engagement with him, and he is simply married."

"Should his wife die, he would be free again, for I shall give him the benefit of a few years, as I am young yet, and even should my beauty fade, you know my fortune would bring me suitors galore."

Frank Fairfield gnashed his teeth with rage.

This beautiful, self-faced girl, for she was hardly anything more, was too deep for him. She was more than he could understand.

"Do I understand also that our compact still holds good?"

"Certainly; for I know of no one whom I would rather marry than you, should Dunbar Kennon die."

There was not the shadow of a suspicion upon her face or in her words that she wished Dunbar Kennon to die, only she suggested that in case he did, she would marry Frank Fairfield.

Otherwise the young farmer dared not take it.

"I am glad to feel at least that the old compact remains," he said.

"You remember that there was another thing in our compact?"

"What was that?"

"That Dunbar Kennon was not to die by your hand."

"Ah, yes."

"I thought from your manner that you had forgotten it, sir."

"I had; but I will remember it in future, Miss Rossmore."

"It will be to your welfare to do so, Mr. Fairfield."

"Do you know what Kennon is doing?"

"What is he doing?" she asked.

"He is captain of a small brig running between New York and New Orleans."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; for I had a friend who was passenger on the craft, and he spoke of Kennon's wife as being very beautiful and fascinating."

"She certainly is."

"A Mexican, I believe?"

"Yes, with a touch of romance in her marrying him, for they were captives together to pirates, and she managed to plan their escape."

"Owing to this, as Dunbar Kennon owed her his life and that of his servant Paul, whom he loves as though he were a brother, I verily believe, he made her his wife, as he saw that she loved him and had no friends or kindred," and Valerie seemed to take pleasure in telling this little romance of why Dunbar Kennon had married another while engaged to her.

"But my friend says that he owns the brig."

"Ah! then he has managed to get some money somewhere, and I am glad to know of his success."

"Were he in want I would gladly aid him could I do so; but I am under a vow to never

allow him to touch one dollar of what was to have been his inheritance, unless *he makes me his wife.*"

Frank Fairfield now arose, and gaining Valerie's permission to call again, took his departure, while as he threw himself back in his carriage there broke from his lips the words:

"Dunbar Kennon must die, for only through his death can I win!"

CHAPTER LI.

THE SWORDMASTER'S PLOT.

"MONSIEUR GERARD, have you anything in view for the future?"

It was Frank Fairfield who asked the question and it was the night following his visit to Cloudlands, where he had renewed his compact with Valerie Rossmore.

The two were seated together in the library of Cedar Hall, enjoying their cigars, and with a decanter of wine between them.

"Only to make an honest living, monsieur."

"You did not win your ten thousand dollars?"

"No, monsieur."

"But spent considerable of my money in traveling about, and really had a pleasant time?"

"I am not one to be unhappy, monsieur, when I have gold in my purse."

"No matter whose gold it is?"

"I hope monsieur does not wish to quarrel?"

"Oh, no, I only wish to serve you."

"And in doing so monsieur serves himself?"

"Yes."

"What does monsieur desire?"

"Have you any money?"

"Half a thousand in bank in New York, for I had to draw a hundred out."

"I see; but you would like to make it ten thousand."

"Of course, monsieur."

"Dunbar Kennon still lives."

"I would not challenge him again, Monsieur Fairfield, for ten times that sum."

"Why?"

"He would kill me."

"You fear him then?"

"Yes, as you do, monsieur."

Frank Fairfield flushed at this, but said quietly:

"I will pay you ten thousand when you bring me word that he is dead."

"It is not enough."

"What do you demand?"

"Give me fifteen thousand dollars, and pay my expenses for three months, maybe for six, and he will not live out the time."

"You mean it?"

"I do, monsieur."

"How will you act?"

"Well, as I said, to fight him would be for me to die, for he is no man to trifle with beyond a certain point."

"But he is now master of a vessel, and spends six weeks of every two months at sea."

"Yes."

"Accidents happen to sailors and to ships, monsieur, and I will see that misfortune and death overtake him."

"Yes, but his wife sails with him, you say?"

"Yes, monsieur, she has her cabin beautifully fitted up and is mistress of the vessel, I assure you, while all the sailors idolize both their captain and his wife."

"This much I found out on my voyage north on the brig."

"What is the name of the craft?"

"The Rover Queen."

"When does she sail from New York again?"

"Within the month."

"And your plan would be to wreck her?"

"My plan would be to get rid of her captain, and save the craft, if possible; but if impossible, to destroy the captain with his ship."

"And the crew?"

"Must take their chances."

"And the wife?"

"Ah!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, monsieur, that I love that beautiful woman with all my soul, and if her husband should die, and I prove her friend, you know, then in the end I might win her."

"I see your deep plot, and as you further your ends you should not ask me more than a few thousand dollars."

"Monsieur, what I do, or do not do, you have no interest in, so long as I keep my contract with you."

"I must have fifteen thousand dollars for my work, when done, and I shall need one thousand dollars a month for expenses, for I shall have men to bribe, you know."

"It is too much."

"You know best; but, as you will add Cloudlands and Mademoiselle Valerie to your fortune by the death of Monsieur Kennon, I think it a very small sum for so high a stake."

"I agree to your terms, so when will you go about your work?"

"I will start for the city in few days."

"I do not see how you are going to be successful."

"Well, monsieur, let me give you my plan."

"You see the Rover Queen carries a captain, two mates and twelve seamen."

"Then there is the steward, Paul, and a negro cook."

"Making seventeen."

"Eighteen all told with the captain's wife."

"Well?"

"Now, I learned that the brig was once a pirate vessel, captured by Lieutenant Kennon when he was in the navy, and he bought her from a firm who sold her cheap, as seamen were afraid to sail in her, saying that she was a craft of ill-omen, on account of her red record as a buccaneer vessel."

"He had her overhauled, refitted and changed her name from Vampire to Rover Queen, and his men do not know her as she was."

"Now, I can go to New York, monsieur, hire a lot of men to be on hand when the craft is ready to sail, and men whom I can trust to do my bidding, and at the last moment let some one tell the regular crew that the Rover Queen is the old Vampire and a doomed ship."

"Much as they love their captain, they will desert him, refuse to sail in her, while I will also see that no passengers go, outside of myself."

"A pretended mutiny at sea will follow, as I shall arrange, Captain Kennon and his mates will be shot, I will be the hero and quell the mutiny and save madame, while the mutineers will go ashore in a boat and escape, well paid for their work—"

"And tell on you."

"No; for though they start ashore, the liquor which they will have along will be such that whoever finds the boat will discover only dead men in it."

"Pierre Gerard, you are the vilest assassin I ever heard."

"Made so to simply aid my devoted friend, Monsieur Fairfield, and to get a little money for myself."

"You are a base man, Gerard."

"Don't compare characters, monsieur, for you were forced to leave the service as a card-cheat and got me to steal the bullet which Captain Kennon intended to put in his son's pistol, and substitute for it a roll of tin-foil, while now you are bribing me to kill Monsieur Kennon."

"Don't compare records, Monsieur Fairfield."

"Go on with your plot," was the quick response of the angry farmer, who was white with rage and yet knew that he was in the power of the Frenchman.

"Well, I will, with the aid of the two negroes, work the brig into port, be a hero in the eyes of madame, and in the end make her my wife, for I am a sailor and can become skipper of the Rover Queen, you know."

"The plot is most devilish, but a good one."

"Yes, monsieur, and now I think of it, I will need the money for expenses all in a lump, for I may not be able to carry out my plans on the first voyage."

"You shall have five thousand, and the other fifteen thousand when you have brought me proof that Dunbar Kennon is dead."

"You shall have the proof, monsieur," and three days after, Pierre Gerard, unmindful of how Dunbar Kennon had spared his life, started for New York to carry out his diabolical plot to kill him, and through his death to leave Zulita at his mercy, she believing him to be a true friend to her in her distress.

CHAPTER LII.

THE KING OF THE ISLAND ROVERS.

THE morning following the storm, which ended up the festivities in honor of Queen Zulita, was one of dire distress to the Island Rovers.

With the coming of dawn the storm-clouds broke away, and Señor Luka, the commandante, awoke from a deep sleep to still feel that he was quite a sick man.

His first act was to sound the tocsin for the coming of the Men in Red, to know if the execution had duly taken place.

In a short while Señor Morte, clad in his scarlet suit and masked, as usual, made his appearance.

"Still sick, Señor Luka?" he asked, in his deep voice, always assumed when dressed as executioner.

"Yes, but better than yesterday and last night."

"Can I serve you, señor?"

"What of last night?"

"It was one of severe storm, but no wrecks are reported."

"Did you do as I ordered?"

"In regard to the two prisoners?"

"Yes."

"I led them forth to execution, señor, and they marched boldly to the cliff and went over."

"Good! and you need not say that I did not witness it; but the Señor Ramon gave me medicine and positively forbade my going out."

"You were right to obey him; but have you the keys of the stronghold?"

"They are here, señor."

"Now kindly send Señor Ramon, the doctor, to me."

The Man in Red departed with a bow, and soon after the doctor appeared, and little did Señor Luka imagine that he was none other than Morte, the executioner.

"You are better this morning, señor, and I will give you a powder that will soon have you on your feet; but hark! what is that noise?"

Wild shouts were heard, lamentations and voices in command.

The doctor gave Luka the powder and was hastening out when in dashed Chief Mazula, his face pallid and grasping a paper in his hand.

Behind him came the Three Wise Men and a large crowd of islanders.

In a word the story was told, for the letter which Mazula held had been tacked upon the door of Zulita's home.

It was addressed to

"MAZULA, Chief,

And

To my People,
The Island Rovers."

He had broken the seal and what he read there had nearly turned his brain to madness.

It was as follows:

"CHIEF MAZULA AND MY PEOPLE:—

"I have struggled hard to fight against the impulse to leave you all forever; but into my heart has come a consciousness that I have done wrong in ruling over a people who are outlaws against the flags of all nations, and remorse is upon me.

"So deep is my remorse, that when the young American prisoner and his slave went to their Death Leap to-night, I was driven to follow them, and my faithful Lazuli, entering into my feelings, has decided to go with me down into the sea.

"In doing so, I feel that I escape a life of remorse in the future through living here as your Queen, and I leave to Chief Mazula, who is to be your King, to play the part that my heart will not allow me to do longer.

"I bid you, then, my people all, a last farewell, and, with Lazuli, we go to our fate.

"Again farewell.

"ZULITA,

"Queen of Island Rovers."

To picture the dismay that followed the reading of this strange letter would be impossible.

The doctor, Señor Ramon, read it carefully and said that he had been prescribing for the Queen the past three days, and that her brain had seemed full of worry, and he did not doubt but that, with her heart touched by remorse, she had sprung from the cliff and taken her own life, while the faithful Lazuli had followed her under the impulse of love for her and excitement.

The Three Wise Men agreed with the doctor, and search upon the rocks revealed some tattered clothing which were known to have been worn by Zulita and Lazuli, so all doubt was ended.

Her home had been left without any change in it, and at once the islanders were in deepest mourning for their mad young Queen, as they now believed her to have been.

The first thing to be done was to install Mazula in as ruler, and this was done by the Three Wise Men, and the new King took up his abode in the Flagship Palace, from which the Queen had gone forth to her death, as all believed.

That the two prisoners had taken the Death Leap was commented upon, but in their grief for Zulita Dunbar Kennon and Paul were almost forgotten.

Grief deep and sincere was felt by all for the young Queen and the pretty Lazuli, and Mazula had the sympathy of all.

Luka was made chief in Mazula's stead, and Señor Ramon, though the doctor, was made commandante of the fort.

Thus matters went on for several days, when into port came one of the cruisers, and then another and another, all having been more or less severely handled by the two storms which had come upon the sea, one following the other.

Next there came in under jury masts, the Red Rover, the craft which the Spray had spoken, and when her captain told what Harman had said about his vessel having sprung a leak, great anxiety was felt for her safety.

As the days passed by and the courier craft failed to return, and none of the cruisers had seen her, it was felt certain that she had foundered at sea and all on board had been lost.

Thus it was that thus far Zulita's bold plot to save Dunbar Kennon and Paul, and for herself to escape from the retreat of the Island Rovers, had proven a perfect success, for not a suspicion seemed to have been raised in the brain of any one that all was not as it appeared to be on the surface.

But there was one who knew that the Rovers were wholly deceived.

That one was Señor Morte, the Man in Red, and also the doctor of the islanders.

But he kept well his secret, as well as he did that Señor Ramon and Señor Morte were one and the same.

After the season of mourning was over, for the Queen and Lazuli, as well as for the loss of the Spray and her crew, King Mazula began to act boldly, and it was not long before the fleet cruisers of the Island Rovers became the terrors of Southern waters, while they eluded the efforts of vessels-of-war of all nations to capture them, or to find the retreat of the daring King of the Caribbean, as the outlaw chief became known upon the sea.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE ROVER QUEEN'S FATE.

THE swordmaster's plot worked to a charm, as far as his sailing on the Rover Queen went, with other minor details which he had planned to come out as he wished.

Dunbar Kennon had, after a few days passed at Toby's cottage come to the conclusion that he must go to work.

He had counted up his capital in hand, and the value of the gems belonging to Zulita, and found that he had a snug little sum to found a fortune on.

Then it occurred to him that he held a certain interest in a vessel, which he had never gotten his prize-money out of.

This vessel was a swift-sailing, handsome little brig once known as the Vampire, and had been captured by him from a buccaneer crew.

He knew the vessel to be in Boston, held by a firm of shippers there, and his interest in her as prize-money he had allowed to remain.

So to Boston he went to find that the Vampire had a bad name, was looked upon as a craft of ill-omen, and had been laid up for months.

He readily bought her for a small sum beyond his interest in her, and put her on the stocks for a thorough overhauling.

Intending to keep Zulita constantly with him, he had her quarters fitted up splendidly, and then having changed the brig's name to Rover Queen, shipped a crew and sailed in her for New York.

Then he entered into an engagement to run her as a packet between New York and New Orleans, and had been most successful in his new vessel.

Zulita seemed perfectly happy, and Paul, as steward, was in his glory.

He had two good mates and a skilled crew, and, after all, life did not look so black to him as it had a few months past.

But, one day, when about to start on his fifth voyage there came trouble.

In some mysterious manner it had leaked out that the Rover Queen was none other than the old pirate brig, Vampire, whose decks had been dyed again and again with blood.

So the crew, to a man, though liking their berth, deserted, just before sailing time.

But a few men were at hand who offered, for big pay, to go, and these were at once shipped and sent to work.

One of the mates also had caught the fever of superstition and left; but a passenger, who was none other than Monsieur Pierre Gerard, who was going to New Orleans to make it his home, said that he was good enough as a sailor to take the place as second mate, and so the vessel put to sea.

Of course it was a cause of great regret to Dunbar Kennon to go to sea short an officer and with a wholly new and untried crew.

But his time of sailing was up, and so he started, thanking Pierre Gerard for not doing as the other passengers had done, leave the brig also with fear of coming evil.

Out of the harbor sped the beautiful vessel under full sail, and those who saw her flying down the harbor and out to sea under clouds of canvas, had reason to remember her well, for days passed, and weeks went by and the Rover Queen had not reached port.

Not a vessel had seen her since she had sailed out to sea from New York Harbor, taking in sail as she drove right into the teeth of a storm.

All vessels coming in reported fearful weather along the coast and in the Gulf, and as weeks went into months, it was an assured fact that the beautiful Rover Queen had gone down at sea with all on board.

She had but carried out her destiny, being an ill-omened craft, was what the superstitious had said, and this verdict was agreed to by all.

For a long time did Frank Fairfield wait for the coming back of Monsieur Pierre Gerard.

But he came not, nor did he receive word from him.

Then he went to the city to make inquiries, and quickly learned the fate of the Rover Queen.

With an exultant heart, exultant because not only had Dunbar Kennon died, but also the Frenchman who could tell strange tales on him, had also gone down, he returned to Cedar Hall and the next day drove over to Cloudlands.

He had paid several visits to Valerie of late, but she had never allowed him to touch upon any subject regarding themselves, or their strange compact.

Now, however, he said with a smile:

"I have news for you, Miss Rossmore."

"Good news?"

"It seems so to me, though it is at the expense of the lives of others."

"Ah! what can you mean?"

"I mean that Dunbar Kennon has gone to the bottom of the sea."

He saw her start, clutch at her chair and become deadly pale, so he said:

"His vessel, the Rover Queen, sailed two months ago, Miss Rossmore, and has not been heard from."

"Is this true?" she asked hoarsely.

"It is."

"Where did she sail from?"

"New York."

"When?"

"Two months ago to-morrow."

"For New Orleans?"

"Yes."

"And has not reached port?"

"No."

"Nor been spoken?"

"She has not been seen since she sailed around Sandy Hook Point."

"It does seem as though she may have been lost."

"Yes, for all vessels have reported most fearful weather for a month after her sailing."

"His wife was with him?"

"Yes."

"And the negro?"

"Yes."

"How many were on board?"

Frank Fairfield told her all that he had learned in New York regarding the vessel, and of the sailors having deserted her.

Then he added:

"Monsieur Gerard, at one time my swordmaster, was a passenger on board, being on his way to New Orleans, I learn, to make his home there, so he has gone down with the brig."

"I can hardly believe that Dunbar Kennon is dead."

"Is it because you do not wish to keep your compact with me?"

"No, for I shall keep it, sir; but I wish to be certain, so set a day six months from now for the fulfillment of my compact with you."

"I must be content."

"You must be, for if, in six months' time, no news has been heard of Dunbar Kennon, I shall believe him dead and become your wife."

"In the mean time I shall see if I can find anything out about the fate of the Rover Queen and those on board. Now leave me, Mr. Fairfield."

He obeyed, and went to his home happy in the belief that Pierre Gerard had overplotted and brought ruin upon himself as well as his victim.

CHAPTER LIV.

"STILL WATERS RUN DEEP."

THE "six months' grace," given by Frank Fairfield to Valerie Rossmore passed away and no tidings had come of the Rover Queen.

Not the most hopeful one of the friends of the vessel could believe other than that she was gone to the bottom, and so it was put down against her as:

"Brig Rover Queen, Captain Dunbar Kennon, lost at sea during equinoctial storm, September 18—, with all on board."

When the six months had nearly passed, Frank Fairfield rode over to Cloudlands to visit Valerie.

"Are you satisfied now?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And at the end of six months will be my wife?"

"At the end of six months I will let it be known that you are to be my husband, and one month after I will marry you," was the reply.

With this he was compelled to be content.

When the six months were passed the neighborhood was pleased and surprised at the change at Cloudlands and in its mistress.

Just a year had gone by since the death of Captain Kennon, and no longer was the grand home kept in mourning, while the sable robes were cast aside by Valerie Rossmore.

Then another surprise came in the rumor that Valerie Rossmore was to marry Farmer Frank Fairfield, of Cedar Hall.

Valerie had told him that he might proclaim it from the house-tops, if so he wished.

And designing mammas, with pretty daughters, bit their lips in vexation of spirit when they felt that the master of Cedar Hall was to become a Benedict, and not become one of their family.

Several days after the announcement of the coming marriage, Fairfield was seated in his library, a trifle nervous, for he knew that there was one whom he feared.

That one was Di Douglass, and as he wondered what she would say and do when she heard of his coming marriage, he was surprised by the entrance of his butler with a note.

"Who brought it?" he asked, turning pale as he recognized the writing.

"Master Saul Douglass, sir."

"Ah, yes, ask him to walk in."

"He has gone, sir, for he said there was no answer."

"All right."

Then Fairfield broke the seal and read:

"There is an ugly rumor which I wish you to contradict to me in person. I will be at the cliff half an hour before sunset, and will expect you to meet me there."

DI FAIRFIELD

"By Heaven! she signs her name *Di Fairfield*! I fear she will give me trouble; but I dare not refuse to meet her."

So to the cliff Farmer Fairfield went, and he found there Di Douglass awaiting him.

He had gone there on horseback, while the maiden had rowed down the river in her skiff and there landing had taken the path leading up to the cliff.

Di Douglass was white-faced, but perfectly calm, though her eyes burned with a dangerous light.

"Frank Fairfield, what is this story I hear about your intended marriage with the heiress of Cloudlands?" she asked, coldly.

"It is true, Di."

"True! do you dare tell me this?"

"I do."

"And am I no barrier to the union?"

"None."

"You dare to say this?"

"I loved you, Di, as I told you, until I met Valerie, and had I never seen her I would have acknowledged you as my wife, being publicly married."

"I asked you to secretly wed me, and at first supposed the ceremony was legal; but the man I told to secure a clergyman, to whom I would pay a large fee to keep the matter secret, got a pal, to earn the money, and thus it was a false marriage, and I am wholly free, so do as you deem best in the matter."

Her bosom heaved with emotion, her face flushed and paled, and for a moment she seemed about to faint; but recovering herself by a great effort, she said:

"When are you to be married, Mr. Fairfield?"

"In two months," he said, indifferently, delighted at having convinced her, as he thought, that the marriage was not a legal one.

"In two months?"

"Yes, about that time."

"And you swear what you have told me is true?"

"Yes, I swear it."

"Oh, Frank! you have nearly broken my heart," and again she seemed about to swoon.

"Don't feel bad, Di, for you will soon forget me. Here, take this money, and run off from home for a while, for a change will do you good. There are five thousand dollars there!"

Her eyes flashed; but she took the roll of bank notes and said:

"Good-by, Frank. I will take your advice and go away for awhile."

"Good-by."

"There's a sensible girl; but come, kiss me good-by, Di."

"No," and she bounded down the path to her boat.

He saw her row away, and then mounting his horse started for his home; but, somehow, he did not feel as happy as he could wish, for Di Douglass had neither shed a tear or upbraided him, neither had she threatened him, and he had expected her to do all these.

The next day, however, he learned that Di had gone to New York to visit some relatives there, and he felt more at ease.

"I told her two months, so she will remain that time away, and when she returns Valerie will have been my wife for over a month," he said.

And so the days went by until the month was at an end, and one day there was a quiet wedding at Cloudlands, and Valerie Rossmore took the name of Mrs. Frank Fairfield.

A bridal-trip of a couple of weeks was made, and then the young couple returned to Cloudlands to live, while Cedar Hall was closed up and deserted.

A month passed after the marriage of Frank Fairfield and Valerie Rossmore, and one afternoon the wife was seated upon the piazza, as was her wont, while the new master of Cloudlands had ridden over to Cedar Hall to see the farmer who had charge of the place.

Suddenly the gate leading into the grounds closed with a bang, and Valerie saw a lady on horseback approaching at a gallop.

As she drew nearer she recognized the handsome face of Di Douglass.

Alighting, she threw her rein to a servant and ascended the steps to where Valerie sat.

Rising to greet her, Valerie was yet surprised at her coming, for she had heard of the old love-romance between Di and her husband, and never knowing her, wondered that she had come to Cloudlands.

But she advanced to meet her, and the look in the face of the young girl fairly startled her, so full of sorrow and passion commingled it was.

But the words of Di Douglass startled her more, for she said in a voice that was trembling with suppressed feeling:

"Miss Rossmore, is my husband, Mr. Frank Fairfield, here?"

CHAPTER LV.

A MYSTERY.

In spite of the dignity which Valerie possessed and her queenly manner, she was so taken aback at the words of Di Douglass calling her "Miss Rossmore," and asking about Farmer Fairfield, her, Di's, husband, that she was speechless for a moment.

Instantly did Di Douglass see the effect of her strange question, and with a heart for others, in spite of her own grief, she said quickly:

"Forgive me, but I have that to tell you of my sorrow which will prove to you that I have suffered as deeply as you must suffer."

"What have you to tell, girl?"

And Valerie spoke in a voice that seemed to choke her with her utterance of each word.

"Miss Rossmore, let me beg of you to hear in calmness all that I have to tell you, and then you can look at the proof I offer you which will show that I would not deceive."

"I will hear what you have to say."

"Be seated, for my story is no short one, and and remember that if I wound your heart, mine has already been hurt enough to drive me mad."

"Let me hear what you have to say," and Valerie dropped into a chair.

Still standing Di said:

"You are aware that in a sudden squall one day on the Hudson, the sail-boat in which was Mr. Fairfield and one of his men, was upset and both thrown out?"

"I know of it, yes."

"I went to their rescue, and the workman, who swam well was drowned, while Mr. Fairfield, who could not swim I saved."

"He lay for days in my father's house, ill and in danger, but at last recovered."

"Such was my meeting with him."

"Handsome, and fascinating as he is, I loved him, and one day he told me he loved me."

"I consented, soon after, to enter into a secret marriage with him."

"I was young, loved him, and led by his influence, and so consented."

"We went by night to a river town, and, as I supposed, were secretly married."

"Then you came to Cloudlands, and seeing you, he forgot me."

"I reproached him, threatened him even, when I heard you were engaged, and he begged for a year's time."

"I gave it to him."

"Then Lieutenant Kennon returned home, and rumor had it that you were engaged to him."

"He departed, returned with a wife, and was disowned by his father, leaving you mistress of Cloudlands."

"Some time ago I heard again that Frank Fairfield was engaged to you, and I wrote him a letter to meet me."

"He did so, and told me that our marriage was a fraud and that he meant to marry you."

"Deceived by my calm manner he gave me a roll of bills, five thousand dollars, and bade me go away for awhile and forget him. I took the money, and as he told me he was not to be married for two months, I went away."

"But it was to trace out his secret marriage with me. Many obstacles were in my way, but at last I got all the proofs."

"The boatman who sailed us across the river, the landlord of the inn where we were married, his own writing in registering our names, the minister who performed the ceremony, and the clerk in the New Jersey town who granted the license."

"I found out also that he had paid a man, Monsieur Gerard, I think it was, to go there and destroy all evidence, and the French swordmaster had said that he had done so, I am sure, and taken his money."

"With this proof I started to return, believing that I had ample time in which to warn you, and, to my dismay, discovered that he had deceived me, for when he had said he would not be married for two months, he had wedded you within half that time."

"I then came at once to see you, and, Heaven knows I am sorry I was too late; but here are the proofs, Miss Rossmore."

She handed to Valerie as she spoke a number of legal-looking papers.

Almost mechanically Valerie looked over them, and then said:

"I believe you, Mrs. Fairfield; but here comes your husband now, and I beg of you to keep all that has occurred a secret."

"Will you?"

"Yes."

A few moments more and Frank Fairfield ascended the steps.

He started at seeing Di and turned deadly pale.

"Mr. Fairfield, I have just had a visit from your wife—nay, not a word, for here are the proofs of your perfidy."

"I have no desire to be known as having entered into a false marriage with you; so, as I hold the proofs of your crime, I will give you just twelve hours to leave this country. If you can be found in that time, I shall send you to prison, so go!"

"Take your own life, if you wish, turn sailor, pirate, or what you please, but go!"

He fairly writhed under her scornful words, and as he attempted to speak she said:

"Leave me at once, or go to prison! If you need money, you can draw a draft on your arrival in New York; but let the world believe you have met with an accident, killed yourself or been murdered."

"Now, go!"

He turned and walked rapidly down the steps, mounted his horse, which was at the hitching-rack, and rode rapidly away in the gathering gloom.

"Mrs. Fairfield, remember this is as a dead

secret between us, and the disappearance of Frank Fairfield must remain a mystery."

"I will call my carriage and send you home," and Valerie Rossmore found herself equal to the painful situation in which she found herself through her marriage with Frank Fairfield having been a mockery.

CONCLUSION.

THERE was cause for wonder and gossip in the vicinity of Cloudlands, for the horse of Farmer Frank Fairfield had been found crushed to death upon the rocks beneath the cliff not very far from the home of Di Douglass.

The tide had risen and fallen during the night, and it was supposed that the young farmer's body had been carried off, for that his horse had gone over the cliff with him no one doubted.

The animal was known to have been vicious and a runaway, and it was surmised that he had run off with his rider and in his mad flight had dashed over the cliff.

But there were two who believed that Frank Fairfield, driven to madness by his exposure, had ridden the animal over the cliff, thus taking his own life.

And those two, Valerie Rossmore and the unacknowledged wife, Di, kept their secret locked up in their own hearts, and so the world was none the wiser.

And while the neighbors pitied Valerie in her great trouble, she dwelt alone in Cloudlands, hiding her sorrows and letting the world believe what it might, while poor Di, still loving the man who had wrought so much mischief, lived in River Vale Cottage, silent, sad and with her secret locked up in her own bosom that no curious eyes should fathom the depths of her misery.

And thus it is, reader mine, that a skeleton in many a heart is hidden by a smiling face.

THE END.

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Had the Red Hands Again Swooped Down?

Woe, then, to the Daughter of the Fort!

Woe to two of its best officers!

Woe to the gallant driver!

The suspense was awful, when in came Buffalo Bill, the chief army scout, from a long absence on an unknown mission. He heard all—weighed all—arranged all, and, confiding only in the

Dare Devil Lieutenant of the Post—

the great scout disappears again on his lone trail, one of infinite danger, of exhausting vigilance, of unavoidable suffering. The wonderful work he performed, the astounding discoveries he made, the tremendous climax he precipitated, and the wild huzzas that "made the welkin ring,"—

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Buffalo Bill's Death-Knell; or, THE RED HAND RIDERS OF THE ROCKIES. BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.



"WELL, THAT IS LIKE READING ONE'S OWN OBITUARY!"

CHAPTER I.

THE SCOUT'S DEATH WARNING.

"WELL! that is like reading one's own obituary!"

"Only I'm not yet dead, and before I pass in

my chips some of those who put this ghostly warning and death-knell to Buffalo Bill may cross into the Land of Silence before he does."

So spoke a man who had ridden up to a cross made of hewn timber, and which stood upon a

summit that commanded an extensive view of the country surrounding: a wild, unsettled land where lurked only death and danger.

The cross stood just off the trail, near a spring about which were the signs of a camp, and it

had been firmly planted there for a purpose that was two-fold.

At its base were the lonely mounds marking the last resting-place of several dead persons who had met their death there on the stage trail that ran near, and it had been erected by the comrades of the fallen driver of the coach, in his memory and to his passengers who had lost their lives at the same time.

There was cut into the wooden cross the word "BEWARE,"

and beneath it was the name of the driver, with a warning to his slayers that their doom would yet be at the end of a rope.

But, the horseman who now gazed upon the cross saw that its wording had been changed from what it was when placed there.

More skillfully cut into the wood than was the original, he read the "Beware" changed in its wording to suit another than the guilty.

He beheld at either end of the arm of the cross, most skillfully carved, a Death's Head and Cross-bones, while cut into the center was a smaller cross, defacing the original lettering, and in its place he read:

"BUFFALO BILL

"BEWARE!"

"Take notice, W. F. Cody—Buffalo Bill the scout—that, as you had this cross erected here to the memory of your pard, Six-Horse Sam, who drove this trail, and as a warning that his slayers should yet die at the rope end, we, the

RED HAND RIDERS,

now sound your death-knell, and take solemn oath to bury your body at the base of this cross before another year has rolled by.

"To save your life give up your hunt for the band of road-agents known as the Red Hand Riders."

The man who stood before the cross reading the warning cut into it, was one to command attention and admiration anywhere.

His face and bearing were distinguished, for, as upright as a soldier, he was over six feet in height and his form was both elegant and indicative of great strength, quickness and endurance.

He was clad in frontier garb, with top-boots and large slouch hat, and wore a belt of arms.

His hair was dark, waving and worn long, and but lately shaven he had a mustache and imperial which gave him a military air, while his features were perfect, expressive and strongly marked.

His horse stood at his side, equipped for a long trail, and with a rifle hanging from the saddle-horn: a worthy animal to bear such a rider, for the man was Buffalo Bill, one now known the wide world over, and whose deeds of daring, whose life of romance and thrilling adventure upon the frontier in the days gone by have made him famous as a hero of the Wild West.

Dismounting at the cross, Buffalo Bill stood gazing upon it in silence for fully a minute, after uttering the words that open this story, a story founded upon real incidents in the life of the noted scout, and telling of those who now live in history.

At last, with a sigh, the scout mused aloud:

"It is said that a threatened man is long-lived, and it may be so.

"Certainly, I manage to keep above ground in spite of many threats made to kill me.

"But I must look to it that this threat is not carried out, for the Red Hand Riders are a desperate lot and would be only too glad to kill me.

They have vowed to drive me away, or kill me, so I take up the war with them from today, and as they have begun it I will be the last to end it, for now I shall avenge my old pard, Six-Horse Sam, whom they murdered here—oh!"

And with the exclamation from the scout's lips mingled the crack of a rifle, and he staggered back and fell heavily to the ground.

CHAPTER II.

THE GAME OF DEATH.

THE puff of smoke from behind a distant rock, had caught the eye of the scout just as the bullet came and the report followed.

The bit of lead had been well-aimed and a stain of red over the right temple showed where it had struck or passed, and Buffalo Bill lay as motionless as though it had pierced his brain.

His horse, startled by the shot, had at first sprung away, but now turned, trotted up to his fallen rider and stood gazing down upon

him, snorting in terror and apparently in anger at his death.

A moment passed; then out of the thicket sheltering the group of rocks from the midst of which had come the shot, advanced two men, each with a rifle in hand.

They were dressed in buckskin leggings, gray-woolen shirts, sombreros, top-boots, and wore masks, while their hands were covered with red gloves.

Both were well-armed, and came forward, at first cautiously—their eyes upon the fallen scout; and then with more rapid stride when one of them said:

"Owl, your shot did the work, for he is dead. Sorry, for that will disappoint the band; they all wished to hang him."

"Yes, but he was too dangerous to allow him to escape, Hawk, and so I aimed to kill," answered the other.

"Well, it will raise a terrible row for awhile, and the soldiers will hunt us hard, for Buffalo Bill is the idol of the army; but after awhile it will blow over and we will rake in the gold!"

"You bet we will! and I will be the dandy of the outfit, for it was my bullet that brought down the dreaded Buffalo Bill. Why, Hawk, it ought to make me chief, if Captain Eagle gets killed."

"Which Captain Eagle won't, for he bears a charmed life, as we have all thought that Buffalo Bill did."

The two outlaws now advanced more rapidly toward the prostrate scout, and, as they drew near, Owl called out:

"Squarely in the temple, Hawk, for see where my bullet cut its way."

"A splendid shot, Owl, and— Devils! look out!"

The exclamation was caused by the sudden rush of Buffalo Bill's horse directly upon them, his white teeth revealed, his eyes flashing with revengeful fury.

"Don't kill him! He is too rich a prize," shouted Owl as Hawk was drawing his revolver.

The warning was unheeded, as Hawk saw his danger and threw his revolver forward to fire.

But, the finger never pulled trigger as the man dropped dead in his tracks ere the report of a pistol died away, and, with a cry of horror, Owl turned to see who had fired the shot only to behold Buffalo Bill suddenly rise to his feet, revolver in hand!

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